

**A SUCCESSFUL RURAL SCHOOL MODEL AS PERCEIVED BY LOCAL  
STAKEHOLDERS IN THE PINEWOODS INDEPENDENT  
SCHOOL DISTRICT, TEXAS**

A Dissertation

by

JEROLADETTE CENTILLI

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2008

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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## **ABSTRACT**

A Successful Rural School Model as Perceived by Local Stakeholders in the Pinewoods

Independent School District, Texas. (December 2008)

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M.S., Texas A&M International University

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This research was a qualitative case study involving 24 participants of a rural junior/senior high school in East Texas. The purpose of this study was to document the perceptions of students, faculty, administration, and community members in a small rural Texas community, exploring why they perceive their school to be a successful learning environment. The main objective of this basic interpretative case study was to interpret the meaning of how the participants make sense of their lives and their worlds. This study was guided by the following research questions: What factors determine success as identified by stakeholders in Pinewoods Independent School District? How do stakeholders in Pinewoods Independent School District perceive success in their junior/senior high school?

The method of inquiry was an informal conversational interview with each participant. These interviews triangulated with a focus group, examination of historical documents, observations, and member checks. The themes revealed in the research included: (a) the rural advantage with three sub-themes, community safe and supportive of its citizens, a community without racial tension, and a nurturing community; (b) pride

and tradition with two sub-themes, high expectations and competitive nature of school and school pride; and (c) quality of the school, Pinewoods style with four sub-themes, good discipline in school, dedicated teachers, high expectations in academic and extracurricular activities, and Pinewoods as a successful school.

There are implications for policy, practice, and additional research that are necessary for all demographic factors of a rural community. The demographic factors include administrators, teachers, students, and citizens. The intent of the researcher is that the findings of this study be shared with other interested individuals throughout the state and nation to help them better understand how students are taught by a dedicated faculty, staff, and administration, while working through various difficulties such as low socioeconomic students, a continually decreasing community economy, and a lack of sufficient resources for the school.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my guardian angels who made an impact on my life in one way or another. I am because of you:

In memory of my grandparents:  
Floryan Leon and Mary Pauline (Draeger) Centilli  
Thomas and Lily Elizabeth (Thompson) Vaughan

To the memory of my great-grandmother Mary Elizabeth (Tidwell) Thompson;  
I still feel your arms protecting me when I am scared.

In memory of my uncles and aunts:  
William D. and Frances Centilli  
Bennie S. and Florine (Centilli) Brown  
Floryan Leon Centilli, Jr.  
John D. Vaughan

To my parents Gerald and Lorene (Vaughan) Centilli, your love, support, and belief in me gave me the strength to keep going. Special thanks for taking care of your fourth “grandchild” (Ranger Boy) when I had to travel.

To the community of Pinewoods, Texas, and faculty, staff, and students of Pinewoods High School, you accepted me, helped me, and encouraged me to complete this project. Thank you for your trust in allowing me into your school and community. You are truly an inspiration and this paper is for all of you.

To graduates of small rural schools everywhere, let no one insult you for being from the country because a quality education is not just obtained in large urban schools. Though I no longer reside there, my heart and my soul will always be embedded deep in the East Texas Piney Woods, and I am proud to be from a rural area: Mi raíces están aquí.

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*May God Bless You, Always!*



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, various education reform movements have focused on improving rural schools primarily by changing their structure to be more like their urban counterparts (Freeman & Anderman, 2005). For example, Freeman and Anderman (2005) contended that state departments of education have forced rural schools to combine into large consolidated districts in order to improve their students' educational experience, with the result of increased professionalism, centralization, and bureaucracy. Theobald (2005) argued that in the context of a historical perspective, the reason rural schools have had to take a back-seat to urban education is "when the common school concept was finally deemed to be an acceptable feature of life in the United States, it was no coincidence that it began in states with major urban centers" (p. 117).

Therefore, as Theobald stated in reference to early history in American education, state education departments located in urban areas responded to urban needs, consequently creating policies for education that may or may not have been parallel to the needs of education in rural areas creating "a kind of cultural divide between urban and rural schools" (Theobald, 2005, p. 117). Theobald argued that through misleading reform efforts, this divide persists in the twenty-first century (Howley, 2006).

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The style and format for this dissertation follow that of *The Journal of Educational Research*.

## **Defining Rural Community**

Recently there has been an increase in rural education research that can be attributed to the fact that “in 2002-2003, 27% (12.5 million) of public school students attended school in communities of fewer than 25,000 and 19% (8.8 million) attended school in smaller communities of fewer than 2, 500” (Johnson & Strange, 2005, p. v). In *Why Rural Matters*, Johnson and Strange (2005) define *rural* as:

1. a school or district that is physically located in a place outside of a metropolitan statistical area and has a population of fewer than 2,500 and
2. a school or district that is physically located in a place inside a metropolitan statistical area and has a population of fewer than 2,500 persons (p. 2).

This leads into one of the main problems facing rural education: it lacks a definitive understanding of the meaning of rural (Herzog & Pittman, 1995a). Coladarci (2007) agreed to the absence of a single definition for rural quoting Farmer (1997) in which the meaning of rural is that which is left after the urban has been identified. According to Herzog and Pittman (1995a), the general meaning of rural “is often defined from an outsider urban perspective in much the same way that the dominant culture has traditionally spoken for minority groups” as in the U.S. government term for a rural area is non-metropolitan (p. 2). More to the consensus of recent research, rural areas are defined by the Census Bureau as communities with less than 2,500 inhabitants or less than 1,000 inhabitants per square mile (Herzog & Pittman, 1995a).

Compared to urban schools, the number of rural schools is small, but the extent of rural education is not. “Forty three percent of the nation’s public schools are in rural communities or small towns and 31% of the nation’s children attend these schools”

(Beeson & Strange, 2003, pp. 3-4). Whereas, “roughly one in five public school students attends a rural school, and almost one third of all public schools are located in rural areas” (Coladarci, 2007, p. 1).

### **Rural Education**

As the numbers represent rural communities and rural public school students, the lack of a definitive definition for rural becomes a problem for rural educational research and for this reason Coladarci (2007) argued that:

Cursory descriptions of context in rural education research preclude the clear and informed interpretation of results from an individual study, the meaningful synthesis of results across studies, and, ultimately, the accumulation of reliable knowledge about rural education. And without the accumulation of knowledge, research cannot credibly inform either practice or policy. (p. 2)

Coladarci is not proposing a single definition for rural, but is requesting that rural education researchers genuinely describe the circumstance of their rural subjects. It is important for the researcher to describe the rural context of the research to provide enough information about the environment in which research was conducted in order for the reader to make reasonable judgments that would ultimately benefit rural education researchers, the readers, and the field of rural education research (Coladarci, 2007). For the purpose of this study a rural community was defined as a community with less than 2,500 in population, located away from a large metropolitan area, and the local school is the center point of community activities (Coladarci, 2007; Hilty, 1999; Johnson & Strange, 2005; Theobald, 1991). Rural schools are places where students build relationships while they learn the skills to cooperate, disagree, and negotiate in a world where positive communication skills are a necessary part of life. Therefore, support for



rural communities is necessary because good schools close to home is the right of every child (Jimerson, 2006).

### **Education Research Needs More on Experiences of Rural Schooling**

According to Theobald (1991), 80% of the topics presented in the *History of Education Quarterly* since it was first published have been about urban education. Even today, it is still extremely difficult to find significant research on the experience of rural schooling (Theobald, 1991; Zuckerbrod, 2007). The lack of rural education research is partly because it is constrained in “the truth that rural schools and communities are increasingly invisible in a mass society that is fundamentally preoccupied with its urban identity, its urban problems, and its urban future” (Johnson & Strange, 2005, p. vii). This means that rural schools are concealed behind their larger urban counterparts in part due to the fact that research on rural schools was hindered by a relative lack of data (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998). This situation has rendered rural education research as a relatively much smaller enterprise than many other branches of educational research, even though one third of this country’s students attend rural schools (Colardarci, 2007).

Although during the last several years, more researchers (Budge 2006; Sherwood, 2001; Theobald, 2005) have begun to focus on the effects of rural education on American society, the need for rural education research still remains, since the entire educational system would benefit from understanding the value of rural educational settings and the suitability of small schools (Chalker, 1999). In addition, solid, reliable data and information pertaining to rural schools would increase researchers’ capability of presenting an important and powerful rural America to legislators and other

policymakers (Sherwood, 2001). As the importance of rural education and its effects on society are emphasized, comparisons with urban schools and their effects on society are increasing, thereby creating controversy surrounding rural education and its deficits by focusing on the lack of resources available to rural areas. While the history of American education has progressed since the founding of this country, an obstacle was created between rural and urban education since state education departments located in urban environments responded to urban needs, while ultimately ignoring the needs of the rural areas (Theobald, 2005). Therefore, as research for rural education grows, one fact which will gradually become apparent is that although the environments of urban and rural communities are different, they still on average face similar struggles. Both must respond to increases in area unemployment, poverty, accountability, and student diversity (Truscott & Truscott, 2005), just to name a few of the common obstacles all schools have to address. Like their urban counterparts, many rural communities are in economic distress, which contributes to social problems that affect rural schools and their students' achievement (Budge, 2006).

According to Budge, rural communities are considered by policymakers as expendable when they cannot compete or contribute to the national economy due to isolation through geographic location, weak community infrastructure for business growth, lack of highly skilled human capital, little technological advances, and weak rural economies. Coincidentally, because rural schools and communities are somewhat diverse, rural education researchers recognize that it is difficult to establish a universal

set of characteristics to portray or define rural schools along with their communities (Budge, 2006).

Rural places in the modern world may endure more hardships than other places from the lack of research and from misleading reform efforts to increase improvement in rural education (Howley, 1997). Nonetheless, there are still too few who are attentive to rural circumstances and who can offer something to strengthen the will of those who would see rural schools improve for the benefit of the rural community (Howley, 1997). Furthermore, if public education is to be improved, it would be most beneficial for this nation to begin such an endeavor in rural schools. Regarding rural education Leo-Nyquist and Theobald (1997), argued that if school improvement is going to be effective, then it must begin in rural areas.

### **Statement of Problem**

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 was meant to become a framework to improve the American public school system (Lamb, 2007). This legislation focused America's educational agenda on low-performing schools and districts. Many of these schools and districts are found in rural areas. Further, 45% of America's public schools are located in rural communities (O'Neal & Cox, 2002; Salazar, 2007). Lamb (2007) stated that as a result of NCLB, rural school and school districts face several challenges when meeting the guidelines of accountability as written in NCLB. If these challenges are to be met, there must be more of an emphasis placed on rural communities and their schools in order to better understand how rural circumstance can influence a child's ability to be successful after high school (Lamb, 2007). The rural life experience

may limit a child's educational aspirations even though there are indications that rural communities generate social benefits (Lamb, 2007).

As noted by Howley (2006), it has been claimed that rural values are culturally primitive, which has a profound influence on its citizens, particularly the youth. However, many people who remain devoted to a rural environment resist invasion on their life traditions, and make sense of society in a noticeably rural manner that is not perceived as culturally primitive. Since NCLB was approved, all public schools in the country have been focused on the accountability measures imposed to meet or surpass the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirement. The federal government's new definition of what constitutes a successful school since the NCLB took effect requires all public schools in the United States to be held accountable for student success based on yearly standardized achievement test scores.

Rural schools hold a unique place in the accountability system under NCLB. Lamb (2007) made mention that for over 70 years, rural areas have tested their students. However, high stakes testing under the current accountability standards is significantly different than it was many years ago. Rural schools have to work harder to meet the accountability measures because of low enrollment, limited faculty, and remoteness from other public schools and regional education agency facilities. Increasing the difficulty of meeting the accountability standards are schools with populations of those who are poor and students of color. Such tenets often add to the struggles and challenges met by rural schools as they strive to reach the higher standards of education as defined in NCLB (Lamb, 2007; Salazar, 2007). Little research currently exists to assist law and

policymakers in contextualizing the ability of rural communities to participate in such discussions.

### *Rural Schools and Their Communities*

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has pushed the accountability movement of educational institutions to a divided road (Zdenek, 2005). According to Zdenek, schools select a road which “must be chosen between a consolidation of power within the more efficient hierarchical structures already present, and the distribution of power amongst stakeholders to whom educators are responsible” (p. 2). Zdenek’s general opinion is that future educational leaders must work toward the participation of parents and community for the schools to properly function, even though this may present some obstacles. Rural schools and communities are closely tied together, thereby creating an environment that includes the stakeholders, “the students, parents, teachers, administrators, business people, and all others that reside, work, or rely on the community of which the school is a part” (Zdenek, 2005, p. 3).

Rural schools have traditionally been securely connected to their communities. In prior years, the development of instruction reflected local values, local morals, and local ways of being in the world (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Consequently, involving parents, teachers and members of the community in the process of identifying academic goals, standards and measures of progress can be a powerful medium for improving student achievement. Ultimately, this will influence the direction and success of the school and its programs. When the stakeholders of the school support the standards, it is more likely to provide the resources to meet them (Cunningham, 2004). Today

Americans define school success through accountability, which has become essential in maintaining public confidence. Accountability begins with a shared understanding of desired results (Gemberling, Smith, & Villani, 2000). Public commitment can give school systems and their stakeholders the opportunity to learn about trends among youth and the community that might influence academic outcomes, thereby influencing a school's success (Cunningham, 2004). In other words, public engagement as stakeholders in the school can augment the entire community's overall quality of life (Resnick, 2000), as illustrated in the story of Pinewoods, Texas.

### *Pinewoods, Texas*

Texas ranks second in the nation with 3.3 million people living in rural areas (Beeson & Strange, 2000). In accordance with *Why Rural Matters: The Need For Every State to Take Action* by Beeson and Strange (2000), in Texas, "Texas' rural schools are important to the educational performance of the state, and clearly in need of policy consideration" (p. 113).

Pinewoods, Texas, is the county seat of Pinecone County, which is deep in the East Texas Piney Woods. This community was founded in 1881 by a railway company because of the growing lumber industry in Texas (Hensley, 2000). During the 1920s, the community was at its largest population with over 4,000 residents, and in the 1930s the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration began construction projects for the community, including the county jail and Pinewoods High School. The last several decades have seen a steady decline in the Pinewoods population as the

lumber industry fell sharply after the 1950s (Hensley, 2000). Today, the town's population is holding steady at 1,107 (Alvaraz, Plocheck, & Morren, 2006, p. 349).

Pinewoods Elementary School has a total of 373 students with 29 teachers and one administrator. The demographics of Pinewoods Elementary are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of Pinewoods Elementary School (Grades K-6)

Demographic	Number of Students	Percentage
<b>Ethnic Distribution:</b>		
African American	43	11.5
Hispanic	26	7.0
White	303	81.2
Native American	1	0.3
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0.0
Economically Disadvantaged	210	56.3
Limited English Proficient (LEP)	7	1.9
Total Number of Students	373	

*Source:* Academic Excellence Indicator System (Texas Education Agency, 2007a).

Pinewoods Junior/Senior High School in the Pinewoods Independent School District (PISD), has a population of 320 students with 44 administrators and teachers. The average salary of a Pinewoods teacher with 11 to 20 years teaching experience is \$43,150 and a beginning teacher's salary is \$26,166, which is base pay for Texas teachers (Texas Education Agency, 2007b).

Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School was chosen for this study as a result of its location in a rural area of East Texas. The high school was selected for the study because these are the students who are soon to impact society through their graduation. Though some will go to college, others will immediately begin to work on a full-time basis. The researcher's interest is in the stakeholder's perceptions of a successful school.

Table 2 illustrates the demographics of Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School. As illustrated, the school's demographic makeup is predominately White followed in population by African American and Hispanic.

Table 2. Demographics of Pinewoods Junior/Senior High School (Grades 7-12)

Demographic	Number of Students	Percentage
<b>Ethnic Distribution:</b>		
African American	50	15.6
Hispanic	15	4.7
White	254	79.1
Native American	2	0.6
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0.0
Economically Disadvantaged	157	48.9
Limited English Proficient (LEP)	2	0.6
Total Number of Students	320	

*Source:* Academic Excellence Indicator System (Texas Education Agency, 2007b).

As defined under NCLB, what was meant to be defined as a successful school could be contrary to the opinions of stakeholders in rural school districts like Pinewoods,



Independent School District and the perceptions of its stakeholders, who were more than willing to define what constitutes a successful school.

As stated by Theobald and Rochon (2006),

The stakes riding on the success of the educational endeavor in this country have risen in the last two decades—at precisely the same time that the nation’s educational system has been paralyzed by standards and testing policy that actually works against the possibility of successfully educating all children at the highest level possible (p. 8).

Therefore, due to the requirements set forth in NCLB, many public schools have been forced to teach to a standardized test in order to be rated as an acceptable and successful educational institution. However, in *Assessing School District Quality: Contrasting State and Citizens’ Perspectives*, Haller, Nusser, and Monk (1999) found in their study of rural schools and communities regarding federal accountability measures that:

Our most significant finding has been that residents’ judgments of the merit of their schools bear only tangential relationships to the assessment made by the state education departments (SED). This finding casts doubt upon one of the central assumptions underlying current statewide reform efforts based on monitoring school systems’ performance through commonly utilized criteria expressed in quantitative terms. (p. 279)

In other words, a community’s perception of rural school success is generally not based on standardized test scores. Therefore, it is important to understand the perceptions and influences pertaining to education in rural communities from stakeholder perspectives. As a result, this study sought to explore the perceptions of stakeholders in the rural community for the purpose of augmenting the overall quality of educational life in that community.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The 2007 Senior Class Salutatorian, Julie Smith (pseudonym used to protect anonymity), summed up the general feelings of the graduates in her commencement speech when she stated:

I believe that each and every one of us has been given such a great opportunity to be able to attend and graduate from Pinewoods High School. I love the way we have such inspiring and dedicated teachers and coaches. I love our athletics program and even how many of us spent more time playing basketball or volleyball on this court than at home. I love the size of the school and how everyone knows everyone. Most of all I love the way the community and the alumni take pride in Pinewoods ISD and its students. Pinewoods is definitely one of a kind. (J. Smith, personal communication, May 25, 2007)

The purpose of this case study of a rural junior/senior high school in the Pinewoods Independent School District in Pinewoods, Texas that explored the perceptions of 24 faculty, administration, students, and community members is in Pinewoods, Texas. The study sought to explore their perceptions of what constitutes a successful school. The intent of the study was to determine what local stakeholders in the Pinewoods Independent School District perceive as a successful school.

Colardarci (2007) argued that because rural education research is a smaller venture than other areas of educational research, it has had a detrimental effect on the work of educational practitioners, lawmakers, and others interested in rural education, thereby affecting the ability to improve the quality of schools in rural areas. It is important to note the need of reporting successes of rural schools in education research so as to effectively portray the quality of rural education in order to help guide struggling rural schools in need of assistance, particularly when considering that “roughly one in

five public school students attends a rural school with almost one third of all public schools located in rural areas” (Colardarci, 2007, p. 1).

The study was basic interpretive in that “the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). The researcher was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Budge, 2006). Similar to Budge (2006) in her research titled, *Rural Leaders, Rural Places: Problem, Privilege, and Possibility*, the researcher’s rural upbringing, working-class girlhood, career experiences, gender (female), and racial identity, along with career-related and lived experiences influenced the researcher’s views of the world and the assumptions made concerning rural schools and their communities.

Rural schools may be in a tactical position to influence the kinds of formal and informal community resources necessary to create a constructive environment for local development (Schafft, Alter, & Bridger, 2006). “Rural schools are an important source of community solidarity, a primary node of social interaction and community reproduction, and often are the largest employers in rural areas” (Schafft et al., 2006, p. 2). Therefore, rural schools assist in creating a collective local identity and set of interests for community members by building a sense of place critical for connecting and mobilizing various segments of the community. As such, “rural schools take on multiple social, cultural, and economic development roles that are likely to only become more important as rural economies continue to change” (Schafft et al., 2006, p. 3). Therefore, this study

has significance for rural schools and their communities because it sought to determine how stakeholders perceive success as compared to the current research on rural education where there is a significant void in the area of perceptions of rural school stakeholders. This study will provide information to individuals pursuing employment in small and rural school districts, and it may particularly be beneficial for administrators, (i.e., central office personnel and campus principals). In addition, the study could provide valuable information to universities that prepare future educators by providing them insight regarding the differences between large and small school districts. Finally, the focus of the study could be significant to state and federal legislators concerned about educational issues, superintendents and principals of rural schools, and researchers interested in further study of the perceptions of small and rural school districts.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors determine success as identified by stakeholders in Pinewoods Independent School District?
2. How do stakeholders in Pinewoods Independent School District perceive success in their junior/senior high school?

### **Operational Definitions**

The findings of this study were reviewed within the context of the following definitions of operational terminology:

*Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS)*: This statewide system database compiles specific information regarding the broad operations and achievements of all

Texas independent school districts and their respective public campuses. The AEIS database includes quantitative reporting on student performance from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and information from the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) (Texas Education Agency, 2008a).

*Accountability:* Standards-based accountability consists of comprehensive, and rigorous statewide standards that detail what students should know and be able to do in core subjects (Texas Education Agency, 2008a).

*Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP):* The Texas AYP Plan approved by the United States Department of Education meets the requirements in NCLB and provides a mechanism for evaluating district and campus-based student performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) (Texas Education Agency, 2008a).

*Case Study:* Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) define case study as “the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in real-life settings and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon” (p. 634). A case study defined by Stake (2005) is research that “optimizes understanding by pursuing scholarly research questions” (p. 443). The location of the case study was chosen because of my personal interest as Stake (2005) claims, “Study is undertaken because an intrinsic interest in, for example, this particular child, clinic, conference, or curriculum” (p. 445).

*Community*: All the people who live in a particular area, country, etc. when talked about as a group (Wehmeier, 2000).

*Member Checks*: To check for credibility member checks will be used as “analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were originally collected” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314).

*No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*: Public Law 107-110, signed by President George Bush on January 8, 2002. It reauthorizes and amends federal programs established under the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*. Under NCLB, accountability provisions that formerly applied only to districts and campuses receiving Title I, Part A funds now apply to all districts and campuses. All public school districts, campuses, and the state are evaluated annually for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (Texas Education Agency, 2006).

*Pinewoods Junior/Senior High School*: This school is located in the Pinewoods Independent School District in Pinewoods, Texas, near the Piney Woods section of East Texas. The city of Pinewoods has a population of 1,107 people, while the campus enrollment is 310 (Texas Education Agency, 2006).

*Purposeful Sampling*: This is a type of sampling used in qualitative research. Purposeful sampling involves the selection of “information rich cases from which one can learn about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 1990, p. 169).

*Rural:* Rural areas are sparsely settled places away from the influence of large cities and towns. Such areas are distinct from more intensively settled urban and suburban areas and also from unsettled lands such as outback or wilderness (Johnson & Strange, 2005).

*Rural Community:* A community with less than 2,500 in population, is located away from a large metropolitan area, and the local school is the center point of community activities (Colardarci, 2007; Hilty, 1999; Johnson & Strange, 2005; Theobald, 1991).

*Rural School District:* A school district with a student enrollment of less than 1,500 in grades kindergarten to the twelfth grade. Most rural schools have one to three schools at a minimum (Howley, 2007; Johnson & Strange, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2008).

*Singular Case Study:* Defined by Stake (2005) as “concentrate on the one” (p. 444). This form of case study research is a single unity of analysis, a single instance of a phenomenon, or several instances of the same phenomenon together are studied as one case (Gall et al., 2007).

*Stakeholders:* The stakeholders as described in this study include the teachers, students, administration, parents, and community members in the Pinewoods Independent School District, Texas.

*Successful School:* A successful school provides a broad, comprehensive education to all students. The school aims at high academic achievement for all students and shows a pattern of steadily improving all students’ academic performance.

Performance is measured in a variety of ways, and improvement is considered a function of individual growth and group progress. Students learn much more than academics in the successful school. All constituents in the community – administrators, teachers, students and parents – understand the school’s mission and support its strategies. The school has clear, uniformly high expectations for all students, and the school is organized to meet the learning needs of each and every student (Burke & Collins, 2007).

*Texas Assessment Knowledge and Skills (TAKS):* A completely revised standardized testing program implemented during the academic year of 2002-2003 across all public campuses in the State of Texas. The Texas Assessment of Knowledge of Skills (TAKS) includes a more advanced alignment with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) than any prior assessment format. TAKS has been developed to better reflect good instructional practice and more accurately measure student learning (Texas Education Agency, 2008b).

*Thick Description:* Thick description as described by Stake (1995) “is not complexities objectively described; it is the particular perceptions of the actors” (p. 42).

*Triangulation:* Triangulation through several sources and data collection methods was used to expand the trustworthiness of the study. “Triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (Stake, 2005, p. 454).



### **Assumptions**

The findings of this study encompassed the following assumptions: The researcher utilized a case study reporting mode that emphasizes the development of local knowledge and context (Stake, 2005) as opposed to the primary goal of generalization characteristic of conventional research paradigms. The participants in this study understood the purpose and significance of the research and answered the interviewer's questions honestly and openly. The researcher collected, interpreted, coded, and analyzed the data appropriately and accurately; and the methodology provided a logical and appropriate design for this particular study.

### **Methodology**

The theoretical framework for this study was basic interpretive in that “the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6).

The findings of this study were ascertained through the following methods for conducting research: This study documented the perceptions of students, faculty, administration, and community members in a small rural Texas community, exploring why they perceive their school to be a successful learning environment. The case study, as defined by Stake (2005), was chosen to examine, in depth, what makes this school remarkable in the opinion of its stakeholders. The location of the case study was chosen because of the researcher's personal interest. This town has been an influence on me since I was attending public school in the rival community nearly 20 miles away. In 1986

my sister accepted a teaching position at Pinewoods High School (pseudonym). My interest lies in why the residents and citizens of this town take so much pride in their school, which is the epitome of Texas football, rural education, and agriculture at its best. According to Stake (2005), a case study is undertaken because of an intrinsic interest in, for example, this particular child, clinic, conference, or curriculum” (p. 445) in the school district.

### *Population*

The sample for this study consisted of a purposeful sample of 24 people. Six teachers, two administrators, and eight students (two from each grade level 9-12) participated in the study from Pinewoods Junior/Senior High School in the Pinewoods Independent School District. Eight community members from Pinewoods, Texas, also participated in the study. The principal sent a note to the entire faculty asking for volunteers to participate in the study. Four White, female teachers and two male teachers (one White and one African American) volunteered to participate. The two administrators, (both White men), agreed to participate. They served as the superintendent and principal, respectively. With the help of the principal, the eight students selected were invited based on gender, race, and class rank; one student from each grade level who ranked in the top five of the class and one student from each grade level who was ranked in the lower half of the class were chosen. Two of the students were Hispanic, one student was African American, and five students were White.

The researcher attended several community-based meetings, such as the local garden club and the Lions Club to explain the project and request volunteers for the

study. The community members interviewed were all chosen based on whether they would volunteer to be interviewed. Of the eight community members interviewed, three were male and five were female; two were African American and six were White.

All 24 participants were interviewed with general lead off questions asked as a result of analyzing the information obtained from the primary source documents in particular, the Academic Excellence Indicator System Reports (AEIS), my personal observations, local newspaper articles, and the school's websites.

The researcher utilized a series of qualitative inquiry methods outlined in Lincoln and Guba (1985), including: interviews, observations, document analysis, and other methods, as deemed appropriate. Qualitative methods were deemed to be effective means of collecting and analyzing data, since they supported the exploration of themes and categories of importance to both the researcher and participants (Garrett, 2005).

### *Procedures*

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from Texas A&M University and the study was conducted during the Spring semester of 2008. Permission was obtained from the superintendent prior to data collection. The researcher identified teachers, administrators, students, and community members who were willing to contribute to the study of the case. Interviews were semi-structured, 30 minutes to one hour in length, and the sessions were tape recorded. The researcher utilized field notes, her personal observations, and documentation obtained from the institution and community members such that rich descriptions emerged.

### *Data Analysis*

The researcher used a number of methods in the analysis of data. First, interviews were transcribed from audio tapes to computer-typed transcripts. To ensure the credibility of interviews, the researcher performed ongoing member checks throughout the duration of the interviews and returned to Pinewoods ISD with copies of transcripts for participants to review. The researcher conducted interviews during the follow-up visit with the adult participants, which lasted no longer than 30 minutes. Only one participant was not available, so his transcript was mailed to him for his review. Once he reviewed the document, he returned the transcript with his corrections to the researcher by U.S. mail. The researcher conducted a focus group with the student participants for the follow-up visit that lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. During this time, the researcher asked follow-up questions while the student participants reviewed and corrected their transcripts.

A formal content analysis was then conducted, in which the researcher coded the data and categorized units of data across major themes. In addition, document analysis, participant observation, a student focus group, and researcher observation were used as methods of triangulation in an effort to validate participants' answers to interview questions and further enhance the accuracy and credibility of the study undertaken. The data analysis was based on a continuous process of the interviews, focus group, document examination, observations, open-ended questions, and data coding during the Spring and Summer of 2008.

### **Significance of the Study**

Rural schools are unique as compared to urban schools in that rural schools are more localized, which reflect local values, morals, and world views, and are most often symbols of small communities. They are also vitally important to the survival of many small communities. Rural schools and communities have become invisible in a society that is essentially anxious with its urban characteristics, municipal problems, and metropolitan future. Increasingly, rural citizens and rural communities look for education that is empowering (i.e., an education that enables them to determine their own choices). “Rural schools and communities have strengths that should be part of the prescription to address problems and create a foundation for directing changes in rural education (Herzog & Pittman, 1995b, p. 13).

Rural communities look to education to prepare their citizens to create a livelihood and to either stay in the rural community or move to urban areas. Whatever the choice, rural education provides a challenge to policymakers in lieu of recent accountability legislation to devise flexible policies that support education for both purposes. DeYoung and Lawrence (as cited in Hilty, 1999) affirm that rural schools and their communities are closely linked:

Ties to community, place, and family are often strong in rural communities, and it is in the local schoolhouse where many of these attachments are formed and solidified. At the same time, the academic skills and values emphasized today often run counter to the values of place and community. This contradiction is particularly visible in places where personal relationships and attachments to place go back for generations. (p. 161)

The findings of this study may provide valuable insight into the distinctive operations of the rural school. The intent of the researcher is that the findings of this study be shared with other interested individuals throughout the state and nation to help them better understand how students are taught by a dedicated faculty, staff, and administration while working through various difficulties such as low socioeconomic students, a continually decreasing community economy, and a lack of sufficient resources for the school. Educators will have additional information to assist them in carefully examining and determining how comparable the context of this study is to their particular situation.

As a result of a 1995 study on rural schools, Herzog and Pittman (1995b) discovered that “for rural schools to be successful in combating their problems, they will have to capitalize on the community and family ties that our rural students (who participated in the study) rated as so important” (p. 16). Why is it that the rural schools and communities, who have been in the shadows of the urban dominant culture schools, have the qualities the American school critics are looking for, but yet are often ignored? According to Herzog and Pittman (1995b), we have ignored what they claim as ruralness for too long: “As educators, we need to recognize these strengths, take advantage of them and build the preparation of rural educators around them” (p. 16). Beeson and Strange (2000) asserted that “rural kids, their schools, and their communities do matter” (p. 63).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, it was noted that there is no one particular definition that is universally accepted for what constitutes a rural school. For the purposes of this study, rural was defined as having a population of less than 2,500. The need for rural school research and the importance of rural education, along with its effects on society, were discussed. Furthermore, the rural school as it relates to community was outlined and presented, since one depends on the other for survival and its place in the improvement of education. In addition, an overview of the methodology used to conduct the research and the manner in which the research participants were selected was detailed. In addition, an explanation was provided of how data were triangulated, coded, and analyzed for patterns and themes.

Chapter II outlines the literature as it pertains to rural education and the difficult issues regarding rural education. Chapter III provides a description of the district and surrounding community, and introduces the 24 participants. Further, it describes in detail the method of inquiry, an accurate portrayal of the participants, how they were selected, the research design, the data analysis, and the limitations of the study. Chapter IV contains the analysis of the data and a discussion of the interview and focus group sessions, which are followed by a discussion and analysis of themes that surfaced. Chapter V is a summary of the data and the final description of the story as told to the researcher through the perceptions of the participants. Also included in Chapter V are the conclusions reached as a result of the study along with implications and recommendations for further research.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

The rural high school signifies a piece of American public education, often along with a negative perception regarding rural people and places, coupled with the unique educational needs of rural communities being fundamentally ignored by the U.S.

Department of Education (USDE) (Arnold, 2005; Herzog & Pittman, 1995b; Nachtigal, 1992). This is not new to rural educators and advocates of rural education, as they have long seen rural schools being treated unfairly by society as a whole (Arnold, 2005).

American society today holds no value for what is rural with a strong prejudice against rural people and places. Consequently, rural students have often ingested these prejudices, thereby forming a low standard view of their home environment (Herzog & Pittman, 1995b).

Although ruralness creates descriptive images, many of those images are based on negative stereotypes. While the pride of rural communities (such as its students graduating and going on to better things, or its athletic teams providing a focus for community spirit and entertainment), rural schools have also been under a microscope by the education bureaucracy of the federal department of education for what appears to be serious deficiencies (Nachtigal, 1992). Rural schools have a strong relation with their communities through the potential to “satisfy the wide panoply of educational demands and desires of the community at large” (Wright, 2007, p. 357). Generally speaking, however, rural high schools are seen as second best because they are smaller than urban



schools. Consequently, there is often a perception that rural schools have fewer opportunities for students in academics, athletics, and in the community. However, rural schools pride themselves in preparing high school graduates to succeed in college and achieve success in the larger society, which they consider to be a measure of the quality of education students received (Nachtigal, 1992).

According to Nachtigal (1992), the rural secondary school has “served the purposes of a society which has become more and more urban over the years” (p. 74), even though it is different in many significant ways because it operates within the context of a rural culture. In addition to the obvious differences relating to isolation, rural schools are smaller and in some areas so small that the “mass production model of schooling” does not work (Nachtigal, 1992, p. 74). In rural schools, each student represents a much larger percentage of the study body (McCracken & Miller, 1988; Nachtigal, 1992; Stanley, Comello, Edwards, & Marquart, 2008). The teachers and administrators of the rural school symbolize the best educated in the rural community (McCracken & Miller, 1988; Nachtigal, 1992). However, they are considered to be public figures and have to be concerned with respectability and public image. There is significantly less chance for anonymity for both students and teachers in rural schools. It is difficult to blend into a crowd when you are the crowd. Additionally, rural school educators’ salaries are generally less than those of urban educators, yet rural educators are among the highest paid people in their respective communities (Monk, 2007; Nachtigal, 1992; Townsell, 2007). Rural school boards consist of mostly

nonprofessionals who occasionally have heated debates when discussing salary levels of school personnel (Nachtigal, 1992).

Usually typical rural schools are in dire need of financial resources. The actual school buildings were oftentimes built in the early twentieth century with different phases of construction occurring periodically. Rural schools are characterized by “the need to ‘make do,’ since extras such as larger classrooms, a commons area, or better vocational facilities will likely only be built when the money is available” (Nachtigal, 1992, p. 76). Regardless of the conditions of rural schools, for the most part, teachers are more satisfied with their jobs than teachers in urban areas, as they consider that by choosing the rural lifestyle “the advantages outweigh the disadvantages” (Nachtigal, 1992, p. 76).

Finally, relationships in the rural school tend to be less formal and students are known by the entire faculty (Jimerson, 2006; Nachtigal, 1992; Smithmier, 1994). Teachers and administrators often have relationships with students outside, as well as within, the school setting. Moreover, many of the characteristics acknowledged by the “effective schools” research concerning interpersonal relationships, shared expectations, and a safe learning environment are a natural part of the rural school environment (Jimerson, 2006; Nachtigal, 1992). The rural school is the focal point of the community’s pride and the center of rural society with corresponding social events; it is where the community provides financial, volunteer, and moral support in return (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

Rural communities have strong ties to their schools in the form of partnerships, locations and use of the school facilities, and citizens' personal investment of time and money. The connection between the school and community in rural areas is strong, positive, and supportive of both entities. The support provided by the community makes the school's success possible and often does so with little or no funds, thus illustrating that the school is an essential component of the community. The community identifies with the school because many of the generations from the community's population attended the school (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

As the rural community is linked, so are its social connections with the youth and adults interacting with the same people in various aspects of society (Nachtigal, 1992). As Nachtigal (1992) explains, "you see the same people at the market, at church, at work, and at school functions. Everyone knows everyone else's business" (p. 74). Therefore, the pride in the rural school is often much greater and taken more seriously, thereby creating a bond between the community and the school which is a common characteristic of small rural schools (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

To imagine rural living as the simple life is oftentimes misleading. Organizations tend to be less bureaucratic and business communications are often verbal rather than written because in rural communities, 'who' said it is as important as what's said. As Nachtigal (1992) explains, citizens in rural communities "tend to be generalists, rather than specialists" (p. 74), while the communities themselves are ethnically and economically more homogeneous. Rural citizens, especially in the agricultural regions, live close to the land; therefore, their position on life tends to be more reactive than

proactive because it is hard to plan for the future when earning a living depends on the environment. Depending on what part of the country they live in, rural citizens are often more autonomous than their urban counterparts. Generally, rural communities correspond to more traditional or conservative values (Nachtigal, 1992). Scholars traditionally have regarded rural life as the stimulation for the expansion of a strong rustic theme in American ideology. The rural belief along with its values embraces a moral ideal that encompasses character, community, and the environment (Theobald, 1991).

### **Defining Rural Education**

#### *The Value of Rural*

While there is no set definition regarding what constitutes *rural*, there has been an increase in the interest surrounding rural areas and their contributions to this country, particularly in the field of education. At the same time that popular culture envisions rural Americans as enjoying an enviable quality of life with simple, hardworking, and honest people as citizens, common belief is that they also suffer from inferior schools, poor health care, limited job opportunities, and so forth (Luther & Todd, 1992). In general, America perceives small rural towns as simpler worlds that are slow paced, non-changing, and “direct, personal, and comprehensible” (Bushnell, 1999, p. 81). When asked about thoughts on the quality of rural, a student said, “Common people, good people, love of land, men without shirts, kids without shoes, women without makeup, people without a care in the world, small churches, not much traffic on dusty, back

roads” (Herzog & Pittman, 1995b, p. 11), which tend to reflect a common conception of society’s definition of ruralness.

According to Monk (2007), rural America defies generalization, thereby creating a problem with past generalizations about rural America. The author characterizes rural areas as “small size, sparse settlement, narrowness of choice (with regard, for example, to shopping, schools, and medical services), distance from population concentrations, and an economic reliance on agricultural industries, sometimes in tandem with tourism” (Monk, 2007, p. 156). However, this generalization about what is rural reflects on this nation’s schools and the negative viewpoints regarding individuals who are rural citizens. Even though we are well into the twenty-first century, there is a strong feeling of prejudice against rural populations (Herzog & Pittman, 1995b; Howley, 2006; Stanley et al., 2008). Haas asserts that, “modern American society does not value ruralness; prejudices against rural people and places are strong. Our students seem to have internalized those prejudices, and they exhibit an inferiority complex about their origins” (Haas, as cited in Herzog & Pittman, 1995a, p. 3). While there are many positive images of what is rural, there are even more that are negative and detrimental to those who reside in rural America (Herzog & Pittman, 1995a). Since these images of what is rural vary from one region of the country to the next, the real problem is not centered on how society imagines ruralness, but on how ruralness is defined.

### *Definitions of Rural*

To clearly define what rural means would affect public policies and practices in education with the emphasis ranging from establishing resource needs to meeting the

goals set by *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) for rural schools. Rural has been defined in several ways with just as many meanings, some of which refer to populations' density, geographic features, and level of economic and industrial development. Even the definitions of rural vary as to how the word is defined. Some definitions use census tracts for classification; yet others may use counties or parishes. In addition, there are definitions that use proximity to metropolitan or urban areas. The classification of rural schools has differences as well, with one defining rural schools according to their distance to an urban area; however, others do not use this metric. What makes a clear definition difficult is the rapidly changing conditions and increase in diversity in rural America (Arnold, Biscoe, Farmer, Robertson, & Shapley, 2007).

The Rural Policy Research Institute (2006) identified nine definitions of rural that generally classified rural places based on population size, level of urbanizations, and proximity to an urbanized area. These definitions, which used in research and making policies, applied the characteristics differently, often contradicting the research results or policy outcomes (Arnold et al., 2007). Federal and state government in the United States use different definitions of rural and its related terms. While the definitions used do not encompass a complete list of definitions to describe rural areas, they are used to better understand the difficulties faced by rural schools and they include the most used in education. There are six definitions and classification systems for rural; some were developed to classify schools and districts (Arnold et al., 2007). The definitions used by federal and state government were identified by the major federal agencies: Census Bureau, Office of Management and Budget, Department of Health and Human Services,

Department of Education, Department of Agriculture, and Government Accountability

Office (Arnold et al., 2007; Coladarci, 2007). These definitions have been used to better understand the challenge rural schools face. These definitions are provided below.

U.S. Census Bureau defines rural areas as open country and settlements with fewer than 2,500 people – rural areas are what remain after all of the urbanized areas have been identified.

Metropolitan status codes define rural relative to a core-based statistical area. Metropolitan areas were identified in 1949 by the Bureau of the Budget and are revised periodically. Metropolitan status codes classify districts into three categories: 1) Central city of a core-based statistical area (CBSA). 2) Located in a CBSA but not in a central city. 3) Not located in a CBSA.

Urban-rural continuum codes define rural by population and proximity to urban areas and were developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service to enable a more precise description and analysis of county-level rural and urban differences. Metropolitan counties have three codes: 1) County in a metropolitan area with one million population or more. 2) County in a metropolitan area of 250,000 to one million population. 3) County in metropolitan area of fewer than 250,000 population. Non-metropolitan counties include six codes: 4) Urban population of 20,000 or more adjacent to a metropolitan area. 5) Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metropolitan area. 6) Urban population of 2,500 – 19,999 adjacent to a metropolitan area. 7) Urban population of 2,500 – 19,999 not adjacent to a metropolitan area. 8) Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population adjacent to metropolitan area. 9) Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population not adjacent to metropolitan area.

Metro-centric locale codes are used for statistical procedures and primarily to identify schools and districts for sampling and statistical procedures. These codes are assigned based on the classification of a school's location. Schools located in places with a population of fewer than 2,500 are considered rural. Two groups of rural schools are identified: schools located outside a CBSA or consolidated statistical areas (CSA) and schools located within such areas.

The U.S. Census Bureau developed the urban-centric locale codes in 2006 which classifies schools into four major types based on their location in relation to urban areas: city, suburban, town, and rural.

Core-based statistical areas are statistically defined geographic areas. (Arnold et al., 2007, pp. 4-7).

In Texas, rural areas are defined through the U.S. Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget, which re-defines their classification systems every ten years. In relation to rural areas in Texas, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 196 of Texas' 254 counties are rural. Of the 196, 106 are located near one of 27 metro areas. Fifty-eight of Texas' counties can be considered urban, which is less than a quarter of all counties in the state. Fifty-seven Texas counties are completely rural, containing no town with a population of 2,500 or more. The rest of the counties are categorized somewhere in between urban and rural (Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, 2008).

There is no distinct definition of the word "rural," which is a problem that has been around for quite some time. In 1971, 35% of the American population resided in rural areas (Sweeney, 1971). However, it is commonly believed that rural communities often suffer from declining populations. Even so, most of the residents are school age children and the elderly, resulting in a serious generation gap for the rural citizens. Sweeney (1971) elaborated by stating that using the Census Bureau definitions for rural will help to distinguish the characteristics of the rural population. He continued to state that, "because of the variance of these factors, no single profile of a rural person or family can be presented" (p. 3).

#### *Characteristics of Rural Communities*

As mentioned, the definition of "rural" has been something of a controversy for many years, which leads researchers to state, again, that there is no single definition of rural or densely populated areas. The most common characteristic of rural communities



is diversity since there is a large range of communities whose citizens share ruralness but differ in circumstances (Sher, 1981). Basically, the only commonality among rural communities is that they are all different. Rural communities are synonymous with small populations and low population density ratios. Sher (1981) argued that “ruralness, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder.” As such, our country’s notion of rural or sparsely populated areas should be valued and attempts to enforce a more global definition resisted (p. 22).

The meaning of a rural community has itself undergone a significant change in the last ten years (Luther & Todd, 1992). These changes have occurred in all aspects of life, which have greatly affected rural communities through the innovations in technology. Television and communications have changed the small towns where they are no longer as isolated as they once were. It seems as though the traditional use of land and geographic terms of community are based on the importance of location and the area economy (Luther & Todd, 1992).

Coladarci (2007) agreed that there is no single definition for rural by quoting Farmer (1997), who described the meaning of rural as “what is left over after the urban has been defined” (p. 2). The general meaning of a rural area, as defined from an urban outsider perspective, is non-metropolitan. Recent research had rural areas defined by the Census Bureau as communities with less than 2,500 inhabitants or less than 1,000 inhabitants per square mile (Herzog & Pittman, 1995a).

However, over 35 years after Sweeney declined to characterize ruralness into one common definition, we are still at a threshold where research requires a definitive stance

of what it means to be rural and how it relates to public schools. According to Colardarci (2007), there is not just one definition of rural. The most common definition of rural is that it refers to a community that contains a population of fewer than 2,500 (Colardarci, 2007; Herzog & Pittman, 1995a). In addition, the U.S. Bureau of the Census defines rural as “a place with fewer than 2,500 people as well as a limit up to 25,000 residents” (Vavrek, 1992, p. 207). Monk (2007) described rural communities as having an economic base characterized as being place bound, aging populations, high rates of poverty, but communities associated with positive attributes.

Even though there is an outcry for a consistent definition of rural, it is not very realistic (Colardarci, 2007). A single or multifaceted definition will not benefit the rural research, programs, or policy that communities which employ the rural concept of one standard definition. The varying use of the purposes for which the measures have been and will be used, will probably guarantee that no universally accepted definition or measurement will be developed for defining rural (Colardarci, 2007). The definition debate continues and is reflected in the research regarding rural education.

### *Defining Rural Schools*

The total number of rural school districts in the United States has various definitions (Monk, 2007). In 2002-2003, 7,824 school districts were defined as rural, which reflected 49% of the school districts in the nation (Monk, 2007). Johnson (as cited in Townsell, 2007) stated, “27% (12.5 million) of public school students attend school in towns with populations of less than 25,000....19% (8.8 million) of the pupils attended school in towns with populations smaller than 2,500” with Texas having the largest

number of students attending rural schools” (p. 7). Johnson’s 2003 study (as cited in Townsell, 2007) also revealed that “49% of American schools are located in rural areas and that 40% of all public school teachers’ work at rural schools” (p. 7). In Texas, there are more children who attend rural schools than in any other state, but its rural student population consists of less than 18% of all Texas public school students (Provasnik et al., 2007).

Rural schools have issues that are a result of prejudicial attitudes toward people from the country (Herzog & Pittman, 1995b). However, rural schools and communities have “strengths that should be part of the prescription addressing the problems and creating a foundation for directing changes in rural education” (Herzog & Pittman, 1995a, p. 2). McCracken and Miller (1988) conducted a study describing the perceptions of rural teachers in regards to their school and communities. They found that “the principal advantages included fewer discipline problems, fewer of the problems found in urban schools, slower pace, lower cost of living, more assistance from the community, people know each other, students know and practice the work ethic, more freedom in teaching, faculty members are respected in the community, and little or no politics in the school system” (p. 24). Additionally, rural schools provide ideal conditions that allow more students to be involved in school activities because the size of the school is generally small. School participation fosters students’ feelings of success, value, and empowerment that may lead students to experience a greater sense of belonging and therefore perform better in school (Jimerson, 2006; Stanley et al., 2008).

Compared to urban schools, the number of rural schools is small, but the extent of rural education is not. The most recent statistics projected that, of the nation's public schools, 43% are located in small towns or rural communities with 31% of America's children attending them. Statistically speaking, almost one in five students attending public schools do so at a rural school and close to one third of all public schools are located in rural areas (Colardarci, 2007) (Table 3). Consequently, there is a need for more accurate research in rural education through the voices and experiences of all who live, work, and are educated in rural areas.

Given the numbers that represent rural communities and rural public school students, the lack of a definitive definition for rural becomes a problem for rural research. Colardarci (2007) argued that the problem of not having one set definition for rural education is not because there is not a consensus regarding the definition of rural. Instead, he insisted the problem is with the rural education researchers because they usually do not describe the context of their research sufficiently enough in their reports and publications. He continued to define this issue as "a problem because cursory descriptions of context in rural education research preclude the clear and informed interpretation of results from an individual study, the meaningful synthesis of results across studies, and, ultimately, the accumulation of reliable knowledge about rural education" (Colardarci, 2007, p. 2).

Table 3. Number of Regular Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts and Percent of Students Who Attend Public Schools in City, Suburban, Town, and Rural Locales, by State or Jurisdiction for the 2005-2006 School Year

State	Total number of districts	Total number of students	City		Suburban		Town		Rural	
			Number of districts	Percent of students	Number of districts	Percent of students	Number of districts	Percent of students	Number of districts	Percent of students
<b>United States<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>14,199</b>	<b>48,013,931</b>	<b>731</b>	<b>28.6</b>	<b>3,543</b>	<b>44.1</b>	<b>1,618</b>	<b>8.1</b>	<b>7,500</b>	<b>17.4</b>
Alabama	165	743,626	14	20.5	31	34.3	29	13.8	58	31.5
Alaska	54	133,288	1	37.3	3	23.9	9	12.0	41	26.8
Arizona	218	943,841	30	50.0	42	33.7	31	8.5	104	7.7
Arkansas	253	472,609	15	26.9	16	13.6	48	21.0	173	38.4
California	987	6,240,080	158	48.8	393	45.6	49	1.2	387	4.3
Colorado	179	779,219	11	32.0	22	48.4	26	7.5	120	12.2
Connecticut	166	549,744	10	23.1	86	59.9	8	5.2	62	11.8
Delaware	19	114,371	1	5.2	9	68.9	3	8.2	6	17.7
District of Columbia	1	59,616	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Florida	67	2,663,973	4	11.5	28	79.2	9	1.8	26	7.4
Georgia	180	1,597,682	15	17.9	33	47.3	49	11.8	83	23.0
Hawaii	1	182,818	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Idaho	122	261,907	7	30.3	13	24.4	25	22.7	77	22.7
Illinois	875	2,097,924	29	29.5	376	52.1	102	7.2	366	11.2
Indiana	294	1,026,106	22	28.2	78	33.1	44	11.5	148	27.2
Iowa	365	483,482	11	27.5	22	11.5	62	23.4	270	37.6
Kansas	300	467,292	6	24.9	28	25.3	49	21.8	217	28.0
Kentucky	176	679,621	6	8.9	31	32.8	46	18.2	93	40.1
Louisiana	68	648,313	6	24.5	13	32.2	15	15.2	34	28.1
Maine	285	195,174	4	9.8	21	18.0	23	18.8	174	53.4
Maryland	24	860,021	1	10.2	12	79.4	2	1.3	9	9.1
Massachusetts	350	808,121	22	30.6	170	64.4	7	0.9	45	4.1
Michigan	552	1,635,076	33	25.9	169	45.2	51	8.1	298	20.8
Minnesota	343	809,156	10	20.0	58	42.7	47	13.7	226	23.6
Mississippi	152	493,952	5	10.8	13	12.7	42	25.2	92	51.3
Missouri	524	915,870	12	20.4	74	41.6	58	13.8	379	24.2
Montana	430	145,259	6	24.4	7	3.6	50	35.0	367	37.1
Nebraska	474	285,547	4	37.2	10	13.0	40	22.2	395	27.6
Nevada	17	412,747	2	17.8	1	71.3	7	8.6	7	2.4
New Hampshire	179	205,636	4	18.4	30	32.0	19	16.1	112	33.5

Table 3 (continued)

State	Total number of districts	Total number of students	City		Suburban		Town		Rural	
			Number of districts	Percent of students	Number of districts	Percent of students	Number of districts	Percent of students	Number of districts	Percent of students
New Jersey	615	1,380,119	14	10.0	468	81.4	1	#	109	8.6
New Mexico	89	326,761	4	43.4	7	13.4	28	31.4	50	11.9
New York	730	2,790,140	58	43.9	312	39.5	52	3.7	307	12.9
North Carolina	115	1,388,216	8	22.3	14	22.9	18	7.8	75	47.0
North Dakota	204	98,172	3	29.6	2	9.1	12	21.0	181	40.3
Ohio	614	1,769,274	22	18.6	228	46.6	74	9.5	288	25.3
Oklahoma	540	634,468	7	21.5	48	28.3	61	19.1	424	31.1
Oregon	200	535,176	11	33.4	42	39.4	30	15.4	114	11.8
Pennsylvania	501	1,752,402	17	20.1	241	51.1	63	9.2	179	19.6
Rhode Island	32	138,934	4	38.1	21	56.6	0	0.0	7	5.3
South Carolina	85	699,027	5	13.8	26	45.1	17	11.9	37	29.2
South Dakota	168	121,718	2	26.7	4	5.7	15	24.0	144	43.6
Tennessee	136	953,796	11	29.5	25	33.2	30	10.6	70	26.7
<b>Texas</b>	<b>1,035</b>	<b>4,450,139</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>42.9</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>36.6</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>8.1</b>	<b>622</b>	<b>12.4</b>
Utah	40	496,507	5	15.9	11	71.0	9	8.3	15	4.8
Vermont	302	94,160	1	3.8	13	17.4	30	26.8	197	52.1
Virginia	134	1,201,142	16	24.0	24	43.9	13	2.5	77	29.6
Washington	296	1,031,668	21	30.4	76	51.9	28	7.1	171	10.6
West Virginia	55	279,788	3	10.0	6	21.9	11	19.5	35	48.6
Wisconsin	440	874,098	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Wyoming	48	86,155	2	29.0	0	0.0	17	46.7	29	24.3

*Source:* U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2005-2006, Version 1a.

Consequently, if reliable knowledge is not accumulated, then research may not be credible enough to support a change or create policy or practice (Colardarci, 2007).

Colardarci (2007) insisted that the context of rural education research should be explained thoroughly through rich description rather than by a universally established definition. It would be more concise to report the provision of sufficient information about the context where the research was in order for the readers to make their own interpretations that are based on the information presented regarding the generalizability

of what is rural (Colardarci, 2007). To clearly describe the research is to include characterizations of the documented evidence that could be more associated with expressed conceptualizations of rural, benefiting both the reader and the field of rural education research, thus better defining rural education.

Colardarci (2007) is not proposing a single definition for rural but is requesting that “rural education researchers carefully describe the context of their (putatively rural) investigations” (p. 2). It is important for the researcher to describe the rural context of the research to provide enough information about where the research was conducted so that readers can make their own informed judgments that would ultimately benefit rural education researchers, the readers, and without doubt, the field of rural education research (Colardarci, 2007).

### **Sense of Place in Rural Communities**

#### *Place Influences Identity*

A community can be defined by its parallel pattern that concerns the relationship of local units to each other (Galbraith, 1992). According to Galbraith (1992), it is through the community’s pattern that “the social system performs locality and relevant functions; provides education, employment, and income; establishes links between various social units and individuals in the community” (p. 8). The community pattern is essential in understanding geographic communities in addition to how people relate to each other. Galbraith’s definition of a community is a combined collection of social units and systems that carry out the major social functions relevant to the location, meaning that the community’s citizens have access to activities necessary in their daily lives. In

other words, “place influences identity” (Ross, 2003, p. 44). It is because of their stronghold with the people, the culture, and the environment that “rural residents have a sense of and attachment to place” (Howley, 2006, p. 65). The attachment to place is important because not only does it provide a sense of identity and purpose, but also indicates that residents have family living in the same community. It is in these communities where the residents are resistant to metropolitan norms, values, and lifestyles (Howley, 2006). Rural citizens value place, community and family, and traditional values such as hard work, discipline, and relationships (Long, Bush, & Theobald, 2003). Therefore, a rural school place becomes more than just a learning opportunity; it is the fundamental point of a life that is interrelated with other beings (Bushnell, 1999).

It has always been a cliché in American vernacular that small rural areas and towns represent the spirit of this country (Luther & Todd, 1992). The tradition of rural life represents an ideal that began in the eighteenth century with a vision of Thomas Jefferson’s yeoman farmer who would settle the frontier and develop an American version of spirituality and democracy (Luther & Todd, 1992). Jefferson, along with Thoreau and Emerson viewed a healthy rural society as being of national importance because the countryside is where the best qualities of humankind could flourish (Theobald, 1991).

Today, an American perception is that to live in rural areas is to live a wholesome, slow paced, friendly lifestyle where traditional American values are still upheld and maintained (Stanley et al., 2008). To sum up the image of rural communities,



Tierney stated “there is something very powerful about the sense of place in rural communities that helps them transcend the challenges of poor infrastructure and few resources” (Tierney, as cited in Budge, 2006, p. 2). Research suggests that a person’s behavior, emotions, character, and outlook are shaped by the genes, neurochemistry, history, relationships, and environment (Budge, 2006). Therefore, a sense of place is definitive of the human experience mixed with its physical contexts or a combination of geography of mind and places (Budge, 2006).

### *The Community’s Identity*

Rural schools across the country are reflections of the communities they serve; therefore, it is exceptionally difficult and usually unsuitable to generalize about rural schools (Pascopella, 2002). Customarily, rural schools are associated closely in their communities with the schooling process reflecting local values, morals, and views of existing in the world (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Rural schools in small towns take on many roles in the community (Lyson, 2002). Rural schools are the heart of local society because the community school is the hub or center for everyone in the community to eventually meet (Hobbs, 1992). Rural schools not only provide the basic education for the community’s children, but they also “serve as social and cultural centers....They are places for sports, theater, music, and other civic activities” (Lyson, 2002, p. 131).

### *Schools as Place in Rural Communities*

Schools are tied to the community as a place (Hilty, 1999) and a community is “multidimensional in scope and perspective” (Galbraith, 1992, p. 8). Small rural communities are centered around the family, the church, and the school that has been common place since this country was first settled (Hilty, 1999). A common belief is that important qualities are intrinsic in rural communities: for example, small towns are rustic, cohesive, friendly, and slow paced (Yang & Fetsch, 2007). Rural communities have set their standards of behavior from these beliefs that ultimately shape the social activities and the community culture thus creating its identity (Hilty, 1999). According to Hobbs, rural communities “can be thought of as a social space occupied by members who perceive common traditions and ways of doing things as well as problems that affect the vitality and viability of their community” (Hobbs, 1992, p. 31). By defining its citizens, rural communities develop them by way of family and friends, while influencing people with landscapes, community, and countryside (Ross, 2003). The interaction between the community and the school is so powerful that rural citizens feel they belong to the school, and thus a feeling is carried on through generations of residents (Hilty, 1999). Therefore, since the school is considered the most inclusive of all community institutions, it potentially belongs to everyone (Hobbs, 1992).

Schools generally are mirror images of the communities in which they are located (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Jimerson, 2006). If the community has serious problems with crime and violence, then odds are that these problems will be in the school as well (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998). Furthermore, smaller communities are characteristically

places that result in close interpersonal associations where individuals know, share, and care for each other (Jimerson, 2006). Communities in rural areas are still most often homogeneous, stable, and traditional, and the schools are an expression of the communities' life (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998). Smaller rural schools reflect these community traits thereby decreasing student isolation, teacher segregation, and stiff boundaries between the administration and the rest of the staff (Jimerson, 2006).

It is believed the culture of small schools is qualitatively and fundamentally different from that of larger schools as in small schools, a culture is developed or a way of doing things that permeates all areas of schooling and makes a huge difference for children (Jimerson, 2006; McCracken & Miller, 1988). In general, rural citizens take pride in their schools, often referring to the school as a family feeling where there is individual attention and the community commits its resources and people for the betterment of the school (McCracken & Miller, 1988). It is no wonder that schools in rural communities provide a path to excellence that bypasses others (Chalker, 1999). The close cooperation and communication between teachers and parents, while providing the basic curriculum that is understood and goal directed, and a small town population, which values the school, illustrates some of the examples of the rural advantage (Chalker, 1999). While the rural advantage may lead to academic success, other variables exist exaggerated as a result of the rural setting that may have a negative impact on students which belong to a particular group or race.

### *Cultural Diversity and Stereotype Threats*

Researchers have noted there is a mixture of individual, community, and school structural variables that are related to academic achievement in rural education including race, ethnicity, and religion (Barnhardt, 1992; Stewart, 2007). According to Stewart (2007), researchers support the ecological theory or the processes that influence individual behavior, as they are combined with community, school level, and individual characteristics to influence academic achievement. Factor such variables as ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status into school adjustment and, as research shows, there will be declines in academic achievement, particularly among African-American students (Splitter, 2007; Stanley et al., 2008). As far as gender is concerned, females adjust better to the existing variables and, therefore, engage in school learning better than their male counterparts (Stanley et al., 2008).

In recent years, more studies have been conducted to determine if and how race, gender, or socioeconomic status affects academic achievement, particularly among rural school students. Research has defined an academic deficiency in these areas as a stereotype threat that is “the pressure that a person can feel when he/she is at risk of confirming, or being seen to confirm a negative stereotype about his/her group” (Steele & Davies, 2003, p. 311). Research has noted that this threat affects academic achievement when an individual feels he/she is not as intelligent because of his/her particular group whether it is related to gender, race, or social status (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Steele & Davies, 2003). Various studies have demonstrated that stereotype threats, though psychological, are very powerful and detrimental to a student’s

academic ability (McGlone & Aronson, 2007; Perry et al., 2003). Some individuals believe these threats contribute to the country's wide achievement gap, which tends to affect different ethnic, gender, and economic populations. Stereotype threat stresses that the effects caused by this negative connotation is related to being labeled as belonging to a particular group which is characterized as being intellectually deficient (Perry et al., 2003; Splitter, 2007; Steele, 2003).

Researchers are trying to make sense of the situation in which a stereotype threat affects different behaviors in addition to what factors intensify, mediate, and moderate its effects in academic and athletic performance as well as with its role in interfering with an individual's real world performance (Perry et al., 2003; Steele, 2003). Key researchers in stereotype threat such as Steele, have determined that social identity can affect intellectual performance; therefore, it is important to understand that this is a very real threat and affects majority group members with the threat of being seen as a racist as easily as it affects the minority groups when they feel they do not belong in a particular setting (Steele, 2003). Together these feelings of threat, which are connected to individuals' social identities, can cause more harm and mistrust in the environments than the narrow-mindedness of discrimination and prejudice these people bring with them (Steele, 2003).

Academic performance affected by racial, gender, or economic concerns has a greater impact in rural schools than urban schools obviously because they are small in size and population (McCracken & Miller, 1988). Consequently, it is important for teachers to be caring, supportive, and respectful in order to contribute to more positive

and socio-emotional outcomes (Stanley et al., 2008) relating to student success, “for it is through education, formal and non-formal, that the political consciousness of a people can be activated and brought to bear on the policies and programs that impact their lives” (Barnhardt, 1992, p. 257).

*Equity, Excellence, and Accountability*

Other factors affecting student achievement that involve ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic populations are exemplified through teachers’ attitudes toward the status of their students or the subgroups in which their students belong. A negative feeling by teachers toward students, particularly students of color, in relation to lack of a student’s academic progress is referred to what McKenzie and Scheruich (2004) defined as an equity trap. An equity trap is a perception many educators have that students of color do not perform as well based on their status in society. Therefore, teachers may lower their expectations for students of color and treat them different believing they cannot perform well academically (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004).

In order for all students to achieve academic success, educators across this country need to evaluate how they perceive a student’s ability to learn. Educators often judge children based on skin color, culture, poverty, and sometimes family status as deficiencies to explain why the student has fallen behind academically. Educators will look to societal factors or ethnicity to blame for the growing achievement gap rather than analyzing the individual child in order to seek a solution for the child’s success. This perception is known as deficit thinking and is “focused on issues external to schools” (Skrla, Scheruich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004, p. 141).

If the achievement gap is to be closed, it is important for educators to realize that racism and inequality exist in this nation's public schools. In order to educate the educators Skrla et al., (2004) recommend equity audits that audit "the school's or district's data for inequities by race" (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p. 617). The equity audit consists of seven steps to be implemented by the administration of a school district:

1. Create a committee of relevant stakeholders.
2. Present the data to the committee and have everyone graph the data.
3. Discuss the meaning of the data, possible use of experts, led by a facilitator.
4. Discuss potential solutions, possible use of experts, led by a facilitator.
5. Implement solution(s).
6. Monitor and evaluate results.
7. Celebrate, if successful; if not successful, return to step 3 and repeat the process. (Skrla et al., 2004, p. 153)

Teachers are instrumental to a student's academic success and the attitude or bias presented during instruction will impact the student's ability to learn. Accountability for all students will never cease in this country; therefore, the time is now for school administrators and teachers to effectively analyze or audit their campuses to seek out any signs of deficit thinking regarding students of color or low socioeconomic status. If educators truly believe that all children can learn, then it is important for them to realize a big factor in a child's ability is based on the attitude of the educated adult.

### *Rural Teachers*

Rural communities fail in their offerings to good, dedicated, and disciplined teachers. Rural communities in general deal with an aging population and low

socioeconomic status often resulting from recent job loss (Monk, 2007). The unemployment in the rural community may be the result of a decline in agricultural products such as lumber, oil, gas, livestock, and other agribusiness consolidations (Monk, 2007). This will filter into education where usually rural schools are as impoverished as their community with a limited school budget (Smithmier, 1994; Townsell, 2007).

Administrators in rural schools often have difficulty in recruiting and hiring qualified teachers who fit in the environment of the rural school and community (Townsell, 2007). Rural school teachers can expect to have small salaries, “16.5% lower than the national average” (Monk, 2007, p. 161) and limited health insurance benefits (Townsell, 2007). In addition, new teachers to rural communities and schools often find it difficult to embrace the social, cultural, and professional responsibilities, since they often report feelings of isolation (Townsell, 2007). McCracken and Miller (1988) described the difficulties of teaching in rural communities where there is limited equipment and less than modern facilities. When living in rural communities, teachers are at times exposed to community cliques and small town gossip while having to adjust to a conservative mind-set and little to none of the conveniences found in larger cities (McCracken & Miller, 1988).

However, the research available regarding teachers in rural communities has shown that rural educators are often more satisfied with their job environments, since they feel they have greater independence with a direct influence on school policy (Monk, 2007). Also consistently reflected in the literature is the feeling of the family-like



atmosphere that teachers report in small schools noting specifically the close personal relationships of teachers, students and parents (Smithmier, 1994). According to Smithmier (1994) and Jimerson (2006), school educators enjoy the social life and pride in the small town that centers on the school and its successes. Research has noted that teachers state the major advantages to working in rural community schools are parental involvement, friendly, respectful students and staff, and good family environments (Jimerson, 2006; McCracken & Miller, 1988; Smithmier, 1994).

McCracken and Miller (1988) studied rural schools and found that the majority of the teachers reported being comfortable teaching in rural communities. Advantages included fewer (a) discipline problems, (b) a slower pace and laidback lifestyle, (c) lower cost of living, (d) community assistance, (e) familiarity, (f) students who are respectable and ethical, (g) teachers who are well respected citizens of the community, and (h) little or no politics affecting the school (McCracken & Miller, 1988). Teachers who live in rural communities and teach in small schools tend to be more satisfied with their jobs, thereby resulting in fewer absences, while also taking a more proactive approach to student learning (Jimerson, 2006). In addition, researchers have observed that these variables are consistently associated with academic achievement, school commitment, school involvement, and school climate (Stewart, 2007).

For a rural school to excel in academics and athletics, the foundation for such a success must come from the faculty. Faculties in rural schools have a strong influence on school culture, if the right circumstances exist (Howley, 2000). According to Perreault and Hill (2000), students' academic success depends on whether they can establish a

sense of connectedness with individuals, the most important being the teachers, in the school environment. As research illustrates, dedicated, supportive, and respectful teachers are important to an environment that promotes positive academic and socio-emotional outcomes (Jimerson, 2006; Stanley et al., 2008).

### **Rural School as It Relates to Community**

#### *Community as a Place to Improve Rural Education*

“Focusing on place, using the community as a curricular lens, not only contributes to re-creating the community, but it will also help realize true school renewal” (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995, p. 10). The focus on place will help recognize proper school renewal by making learning more pragmatic and powerful, while at the same time providing students with the ability to understand who they are and what their place is in the world (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Involving parents, teachers, and members of the community in the process of identifying academic goals, standards, and measures of progress can be a powerful medium for improving student achievement (Cunningham, 2004). Ultimately, this will influence the direction and success of the school and its programs (Cunningham, 2004). When the stakeholders of the school support the standards, it is more likely to provide the resources to meet them (Cunningham, 2004). Today, Americans define school success through accountability, which has become essential in maintaining public confidence; nonetheless, accountability begins with a shared understanding of desired results (Gemberling et al., 2000). Public commitment can give school systems and their stakeholders the opportunity to learn about trends among youth and in the community that might

influence academic outcomes, thereby influencing a school's desired success (Cunningham, 2004). In other words, public engagement as evidenced by stakeholders in the school can augment the entire community's overall quality of life (Resnick, 2000). This augmentation is especially important for rural areas.

Rural schools and communities have become invisible in a society that is essentially anxious and pre-occupied with its urban characteristics, its municipal problems, and its metropolitan future; society is mystified and naïve about rural America and its institutions (Johnson & Strange, 2005). Increasingly, rural citizens and rural communities are looking for an educational process that enables them to make choices (Haas, 1991). They are looking to education to prepare them to create a livelihood and to either stay in the rural community or move on to urban areas (Haas, 1991). Whatever the choice may be, rural education provides a challenge to policymakers in the middle of recent accountability legislation to devise flexible policies that support education for both purposes (Haas, 1991). The strength and vitality of rural schools and communities are impossible to separate as argued by Budge (2006) while the rural communities that are completely functional are rare in today's society. Therefore, rural education research has become increasingly important for the overall improvement of all schools and for the legislators to consider as they create education policy.

#### *The Rural School and the Community's Vitality*

“The *rural* in rural is not most significantly the boundary around it, but the meanings inherent in rural lives wherever lived” (Howley, Theobald, & Howley, 2005, p. 1). Rural schools lead an uncertain existence in many states with small rural high schools

enduring many difficult challenges (Howley, 2000). In many instances, state education agencies and legislatures along with some education professionals see rural schools as dormant rather than active and breaking down rather than succeeding (Howley, 2000). However, rural schools serve a fundamental role in recreating communities in a highly mobile, industrialized, and technological society (Wright, 2007). It is important for schools and their communities to foster a healthy relationship that is crucial to school effectiveness and the communities' quality of life. Rural schools are the central institutions in rural life and, also, play a vital role in the community's economic development (Wright, 2007). While investigating the importance of a school to its rural community's vitality, Lyson (as cited in Wright, 2007) discovered several positive factors relating to the presence of schools, which are described below:

For the smallest rural communities, the presence of a school is associated with many social and economic benefits. Housing values are considerably higher and municipal infrastructure is more developed in small villages with schools. The occupational structure in these communities is qualitatively different from places without schools. Not only are there more people employed in the more favorable occupational categories, but also there is more employment in 'civic' occupations. While average household income is not markedly different across places with and without schools, income inequality and welfare dependence is lower in villages with schools. (p. 357)

Further, according to Nachtigal (1992), the rural school represents a distinctive learning atmosphere that has not been able to capitalize on its inherent strengths as a result of the strain of an urban/industrialized society and the mass-production school system. As society progresses more into the technology era, the chance to redesign rural secondary education, to provide a quality education for rural youth and serve as a resource for community development exists.

### *Symbol of the Community*

Schools are the symbols of community independence, community strength, community integration, personal control, personal and community tradition, and identity, all of which play a key role in the survival of their rural communities (Lyson, 2002). As such, rural communities and schools often cohesively share “a level and depth of strength, memory, and kinship” (Howley, 2000, p. 17) that larger urban areas lack, thereby allowing rural schools to connect with the local cultures and communities (Howley, 2000). The rural school potentially belongs to everyone because schools are the most comprehensive of all community institutions (Hobbs, 1992). In most rural areas, this situation results in a feeling of ownership and a sense of community that generally accompanies it. This perceived sense of unity is reinforced by the school as the largest local employer, in addition to being the place where most of the community events are held for the public (Hobbs, 1992).

“Small schools are commonly the glue that binds together small communities, serving as their economic and social center” (Jimerson, 2006, p. 5). Customarily, rural schools are associated closely among their communities with the schooling process, thereby reflecting local values, morals, and views of existing in the world (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). “It’s extremely difficult and almost always inappropriate to generalize about rural schools across the country because they are reflections of the communities,” says Marty Strange of the Rural School and Community Trust (Pascopella, 2002, p. 42). Customarily, the social support systems of rural children included extended family and

community members, which are a distinctive aspect of rural society praised by Hillary Rodham Clinton (Yang & Fetsch, 2007).

Rural schools are different in that they do not fit into precise categories, given that they are the centers of diverse communities (Hurley, 1999). Rural schools “are places where parents are connecting with students, where teachers and staff go beyond the call of duty, and where everyone pitches in to help the kids” (Hurley, 1999, p. 141). In that way, by accepting the task of affirming and preserving the standards of rural society, which symbolize local tradition and history and by transmitting local culture, small rural schools characteristically work toward the sustainability and reenergization of their local communities (Wright, 2007). Therefore, because the school is a subunit of its own community, students also learn incidentally about community life (Wright, 2007).

Morris and Potter (1999) discussed a powerful description from Donald Warren’s *American Teachers: Histories of a Profession at Work*, where he defined small-town life and the unique problems related to schooling in rural America:

The small school and the opportunity for individualized instruction; the lack of supervision and freedom to experiment with teaching methods that worked; the intimate knowledge of the students and their backgrounds; the close ties between the people and the school; the appreciation and support of the parents – those characteristics of country-school teaching that made it rewarding – were largely lost, no doubt forever, for the sake of efficiency and the large school. (p. 97)

Small schools are obliged to provide leadership within their communities (Wright, 2007). Former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley, in an interview with Vincent Ferrandino (as cited in Wright, 2007), executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, stated, “because the community looks at

principals as leaders, they (the principals) must demonstrate leadership if the school is to become the center of the community” (p. 355). This may presently be the reality of some rural schools.

Commonalities exist among rural society because in many rural communities, “the school is the largest economic enterprise. It has the largest budget, often the finest facility, and the largest cadre of well-trained personnel” (Versteeg, 1993, p. 54). The school is essential to the sustained vitality of the rural community. It is primarily funded by local tax dollars, which the community provides for its most important resource, the children (Nachtigal, 1992). As such, rural communities and schools are often cohesive in sharing “a level and depth of strength, memory, and kinship” that larger urban areas lack, thereby allowing rural schools to connect with the local cultures and communities (Howley, 2000, p. 17). The rural school potentially belongs to everyone because schools are the most comprehensive of all community institutions (Hobbs, 1992). In most rural areas, this results in a feeling of ownership with the sense of community that generally accompanies it. This sense of community is reinforced by the school as the largest local employer in addition to the place where most of the community events are held for the public (Hobbs, 1992).

A vision is developed between the rural school and its community to create a prevailing strength that cultivates the progress of the greater sense of community (Chance, 1999). The school is the largest single enterprise in most rural communities and because of this, school happenings and functions are much more fundamental to living in that community than in urban areas (Nachtigal, 1992). The major source of entertainment

in rural communities revolves around school productions such as athletics, plays, and other competitions, thereby resulting in the rural school being frequently the core of the rural community's activities and focus (Chance, 1999; Nachtigal, 1992).

Consequently, the rural community provides a framework that includes trade and industry support, raw materials (i.e., students), and strong community encouragement for school activities (Chance, 1999). The level of a common relationship and the measure of passion found between the school and community directly reflects on the achievement of both (Chance, 1999). However, such involvement dictates that when the school experiences a problem, it generally becomes one of greater significance in the life of the community, which at times causes unnecessary controversy, which tends to make the problems greater than they originally were (Nachtigal, 1992).

In reality, a cooperating school and community symbolize a better community, and that community represents people who share common values concerning their young people and their future. Chance (1999) emphasized the notion of a great community, is not just a reflection geography, membership or association, even though these are considered to be important elements. Instead, the author insists that a great community represents a shared sense of belonging, caring, and community focus. In addition, people in this community are partners in the educational process of their children. Furthermore, teachers are united with parents and others in the community for a common purpose and direction (Chance, 1999). Schmuck and Schmuck (as cited in Nachtigal, 1992) associated "the small town school to a vortex, drawing everyone into it and serving as a foundation for the community. The school engages virtually everyone, regardless of age,



because, like the river's eddy, it irresistibly draws the community's residents into it" (p. 75). The rural school and its community are inextricably tied to one another.

### *A Culture of Community*

In successful small rural schools, the way of life in the community guides its students in the direction of social capital and gives them practice in building and understanding it (Wright, 2007). The climate in small schools allows for closer relationships between adults and students and between the students themselves, thereby creating a safer environment (Wright, 2007). As research has found, within each school exists a culture of community that is not spelled out, but is intrinsic through the operations and communications of staff, students, parents, and the community (Wright, 2007). The environment is inherently obvious anytime one visits the school. Students in rural schools build such skills as strong relationships, communication, cooperation, and negotiation with other students and teachers because individuals know and care for one another (Wright, 2007). Smaller rural schools utilize the close associations surrounded by small facilities and the teachers' personal connectedness to the community and the school (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

If education is to contribute to the permanent practicality of rural communities, educators then need to concentrate on helping young people understand the place in which they live (Wright, 2007). Children raised in rural areas still need to learn tolerance, negotiation, and commitment, which are three elements that embrace social capital (Wright, 2007). As a well-known advocate of American rural education, Comer (as cited in Wright, 2007) affirmed: "I am more convinced than ever of the importance of

reinventing community, both within our schools and within our neighborhood. This sense of place, of belonging, is a crucial building block for the healthy development of children and adolescents” (p. 348). As is noted in rural education research, the curriculum includes the community, and at the same time, the community becomes a focal point of the curriculum (Wright, 2007). Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) saw this as vital to reorganizing communities in order to meet their learners’ needs. Theobald and Nachtigal (as cited in Wright, 2007) acknowledge that:

Understanding one’s place is critical to this recreation. It ought to be the chief curricular focus in schools for several reasons. Knowledge of place – where you are and where you come from – is intertwined with knowledge of self. Place holds the promise of contributing to the development of meaningful identity. Focusing on place, using the community as a curricular lens, not only contributes to recreating community, but it will also help realize true school renewal. (p. 350)

Successful rural schools fit the community and they are consistent with the uniqueness of rural life. Events relevant to rural areas are integrated within the classroom environment and a correlated curriculum is used to support these events, which “stem from local interests, but also include agricultural shows and community celebrations” (Wright, 2007, p. 353). In addition to being crucial to community interests, rural schools have a considerable responsibility to community renovation through the progress and enrichment of social capital, their local curriculum and by understanding the uniqueness of where they are: their place (Wright, 2007). If rural schools want to be successful in addressing challenges, then they must take advantage of the community and family ties, which are important for rural students (Wright, 2007). The constant connecting of a school to its community not only allows, but also enthusiastically encourages, social

connectedness and a sense of ownership (Wright, 2007) by the citizens of the community and the stakeholders of the school. The connection of the school to its community protects the survival of the school in addition to its community (Wright, 2007).

What happens when the school can no longer function in the community due to budget deficits, declining tax revenue, and population loss? The federal and state education boards often force rural schools to consolidate despite some local efforts to prevent it. While there is not enough research regarding rural education, most of what has been published defines, debates, and discusses the effects of small school consolidation.

### *Defining School Consolidation*

Most of the research on rural education revolves around the consolidation of small schools. Many small schools are a challenge to keep open in most areas of the country (Howley, 2000) because of a decline either in student enrollment or economy of the communities where the schools are located. The negative changes in the economy and a school's enrollment has led to one of the most controversial issues for federal and state legislators, educators, and rural communities, known as consolidation (Bard, Gardner, & Wieland, 2006).

Consolidation involves closing one or more schools to create one larger school (Killeen & Sipple, 2000). Usually consolidation occurs for two reasons: a decline in student enrollment and the school facilities becoming obsolete (Killeen & Sipple, 2000). However, much of the research regarding consolidation states that there are various

reasons for schools to merge. These include financial pressures, decrease in student enrollment, welfare of students, and community pressures (Killeen & Sipple, 2000).

The Consolidation Task Force Committee of the National Rural Education Association (NREA) announced in 2006 they would support the decisions of local rural school districts and continue to be in opposition to random consolidation efforts of the state and local entities (Bard et al., 2006). The NREA also stated they would contest state level decisions mandating consolidation for the reason that consolidation violates local control of schools (Bard et al., 2006).

#### *National Rural Education Association*

The National Rural Education Association (NREA) was established in 1907 for school personnel, education service centers, business representatives, and researchers as an organization to maintain the strength of this country's rural school districts. The objectives of the organization were written to better serve all levels of rural education. Some of the organization's objectives included:

- Take positions on issues involving rural education.
- Strengthen the working relationship with U.S. Department of Education in the recognition of outstanding rural schools.
- Identify rural education needs, materials, and programs.
- Recognize exemplary practices in rural education.
- Maintain liaison with Organizations Concerned About Rural Education (OCRE). (National Rural Education Association [NREA], 2008)

As stated on the NREA (2008) web page, with rural schools serving over 30% of students in this country, they are an important part of the American public education system. The National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition (NREAC) has been a strong voice in the federal government in its approach for Congress to consider the needs of rural schools. A one-size-fits-all federal policy can have detrimental effects on rural schools, particularly if the policy is directed for a larger more urban area school (NREA, 2008). Listed below are some federal policies and the NREAC's position for them in 2008 as was posted on the NREA web page.

1. **Elementary and Secondary Education Act** - NREAC believes that the primary responsibility for determining educational methods and strategies should reside at the local level, consistent with the U.S. Department of Education Organization Act.
2. **Title I** - NREAC believes that in order to help clarify the federal role in public education, students served by Title I programs should be considered as a separate subgroup and schools/ school districts should be held accountable to the terms of the contract with the federal government for their success with these students. In the case of school wide Title I programs, schools would be responsible for the performance of all of their students. Small, rural school districts must receive fair treatment due to their circumstances.
3. **Accountability and Assessment** - NREAC believes states are responsible for determining the type and frequency of assessment, including the use of growth or progress models.
4. **Collaborative Leadership for Improving Student Outcomes** - NREAC believes that excellent teaching is essential and that the states are better able to set appropriate teacher standards than the federal government.
5. **Focus on Rural Schools** - NREAC is concerned that current policy targets Title I funds to concentrations of poverty based on large numbers of students, not merely percentages.

6. **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** - NREAC strongly supports the fulfillment of Congress' promise to pay 40 percent of the National Average per Pupil Expenditure for every child in special education.
7. **Higher Education Act** - NREAC supports efforts to increase the number of quality teachers in rural schools.
8. **E-Rate** - NREAC strongly supports maintaining E-Rate as an element of the Universal Service Fund.
9. **Technology** - NREAC supports the expansion of broadband into rural America.
10. **Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self-Determination Act** - NREAC recognizes the challenges of rural school districts located in federal forest counties and urges the continuation of the safety-net legislation to ensure a consistent funding stream for affected school districts nationwide.
11. **Medicaid Claiming** - NREAC believes that rural districts should be reimbursed for medical, administration and transportation expenses attributed to Medicaid eligible students.
12. **Child Nutrition Programs** - NREAC supports efforts to develop a new definition of nutritional value in conjunction with appropriate exceptions for fundraising, school-sponsored events and classroom celebrations.
13. **Children's Health Care** - NREAC supports efforts to expand health insurance to all children and pregnant mothers up to 300 percent of the poverty line.
14. **Vouchers** - NREAC strongly believes that public funds should be used to fund only public schools.
15. **Qualified Zone Academy Bonds** - NREAC recognizes the success of the QZAB and other school construction programs in addressing some school facility needs.
16. **Early Childhood** - NREAC believes that maximizing children's learning requires equal measures of high expectations, appropriate instruction, early developmental activities and early education. (pp. 1-16)

The NREA is a national advocate for all schools to maintain local control. They are considered a non-profit organization with yearly membership dues for anyone

interested in the improvement for rural education. The NREA has requested, on an annual basis, for researchers practitioners to continue the study into the needs rural education. And because the members of the NREA live and work in rural areas, they understand the various challenges rural schools face and, therefore, have created a political platform regarding rural education policies.

### **Rural Education Policies and Procedures**

#### *Cookie Cutter Solutions*

Rural schools value local control while they face a multitude of challenges from poverty, under-financing, and isolation, to a diminishing team of experienced teachers, along with a high turnover rate among teachers and administrators (Arnold, 2000). Even though there are some viable similarities between rural and urban schools, there are also many obvious differences. Standard policies are not matched to rural schools because of the diversity of the rural areas in the United States. Rural schools are unique in that they differ from one another in terms of requirements, resources, and capacities (Arnold, 2000). These differences prevent the implementation of a cookie cutter approach to address the issues involving rural schools. In other words, the if it works for one it will work for all solutions are standard policies not matched to rural schools because of the diversity of the rural areas in the United States (Arnold, 2000). One approach to guarantee that state policies are better suited for individual rural schools is to significantly involve rural stakeholders in the policy-setting procedure (Arnold, 2000). According to Arnold (2000), “states should have a system for facilitating this participation” (p. 4) between rural stakeholders and state legislatures. Also, local

stakeholders need to be more vocal and constructively communicate their concerns to state policymakers who may not completely understand the consequences of implementing policies in rural contexts. Finally, local communities should be given flexibility to enact policies so as to best suit local needs (Arnold, 2000).

A school's size and district size have been shown to have a major impact on school operations and outcomes (Rural School and Community Trust, 2007). Nine of the 13 states with the most critical economic challenges have the lowest level per pupil funding for instruction, thereby causing some poor rural schools to educate their students with less than adequate resources. In these nine states, as Rural School and Community Trust (2007) asserted, "the policy context is least conducive to educational achievement and compounds challenges faced by rural students and the schools they attend" (Rural School and Community Trust, 2007, p. 3). As a result, it is clear that rural schools face a massive amount of challenges, from poverty, under-financing, and isolation, to a thinning team of experienced teachers, along with a high turnover rate among teachers and administrators (Arnold, 2000). Therefore, standard policies are not matched to rural schools because of the diversity of the rural areas in the United States (Arnold, 2000).

As reported by Grady (1995), in a 1986 study by Kennedy and Barker, the major challenges facing rural district superintendents in small rural districts were securing adequate school funding and improving school curriculum. In addition, it was noted that securing and retaining teachers, along with student achievement, was somewhat of a concern, though not as much as school funding or the school curriculum. Today, education is still dealing with many challenges, particularly as state and federal



education regulations emphasize school reform and accountability by focusing attention on low-performing schools, many of which are located in rural communities (Salazar, 2007). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) sought to provide structure for the American public school system on behalf of student achievement and school accountability (Lamb, 2007).

### *NCLB and Rural Schools*

The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) in 2004 defined NCLB as “built on four common-sense pillars: accountability for results, emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research, expanded parental options, and expanded local control and flexibility” (Paige & Gibbons, 2004, p. 32). However, according to Lamb (2007), research has determined that rural schools and school districts face remarkable challenges under the NCLB 2000 accountability model. For example, maintaining the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), a section under NCLB for every group of students, is extremely difficult for small districts (Lamb, 2007).

The challenges of rural schools are very different from those of urban schools. As noted by Lamb (2007), The National Rural Education Association (NREA) in 2004 declared, “Voices of those who care about the future of rural America must enter the fray over how federal education policies and regulations play out in rural schools and their communities” (p. 33-34), where the need to meet the federal mandates are challenged in rural schools due to budget deficits and low student enrollment causing unreliable test results.

Low enrollment, limited faculty, and remote locations have a profound effect on schools, thereby prompting rural schools to work harder to meet NCLB's accountability measures. Schools with poor and minority students find it even more difficult to meet the accountability standards of NCLB. Therefore, it is of vital importance to understand the complete environment, including the culture and climate, of a rural school along with its students, teachers, and administrators in order to fully comprehend the challenges linked to high stakes testing during this period of student achievement and school accountability (Lamb, 2007).

The issue of student achievement associated with school accountability is the vanguard for researchers of rural education because "it reminds us that trying to make all schools like our largest ones may be disadvantageous to small schools...the 'one best system' of education envisioned by many businessmen and lawmakers may be counterproductive to producing effective small, rural schools" (Hurley, 1999, p. 139). Rural schools, while adhering to state and federal regulations, should be approached differently from their urban counterparts; "rural schools are some of our finest American educational institutions" where success and academic excellence are plentiful and expected (Hurley, 1999, p. 139). The NCLB model of education has decontextualized education because it contains centralization, specialization, and standardizations, which tend to cause good rural schools to separate from the local community, its values, and its culture (Hurley, 1999). Hurley (1999) argues that state legislators need to be reminded that "rural schools may be the models they should be holding up for others" (p. 153) as a replacement for promoting centralization and standardization. The benefits of localness

and rural cultures should be recognized as being in the best interest of the children (Hurley, 1999). State-based standards may help some schools, but the need is for locally established standards, which are necessary to fuel the development of genuinely good rural schools (Hurley, 1999).

In the wake of NCLB, the measure of educational success is obtained by students' achievement on standardized tests. This issue is becoming the main objective of this country's educational politics. According to Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Crowley (2006), "much of the current political rhetoric revolves around evaluating the competency of teachers or schools, introducing competition and choice to current public schooling options and increasing mandatory student testing" (p. 2121). This affects rural areas differently, as rural schools lack the availability of resources, since they depend on the local economy (Roscigno et al., 2006). NCLB has placed a burden on rural education policies because all over the country, rural areas have been affected by industrial restructuring, particularly in agriculture, with growing rates of unemployment, reliance on part-time service sector work, and family economic vulnerability (Roscigno et al. 2006). This economic uncertainty, particularly in the rural areas, has led to academic difficulties for rural children. Educational research has illustrated that the socioeconomic status of a student's household may influence both achievement and accomplishment (Roscigno et al., 2006).

Socioeconomic status not only affects the rural families, but it also shapes the rural schools' policies and procedures, along with the availability of school resources, which are affected by the level of educational revenue generated through the local

property taxes (Roscigno et al., 2006). Rural districts are currently leading the fight to the state and federal arguments regarding school funding, reform, and litigation (Roscigno et al., 2006). The defining argument for rural schools is that, like their urban counterparts, they are influenced by the place in which they are located. Location and area drive the policies, procedures, rules, and regulations, while they differ extensively in opportunity, which ultimately affects their resources (Roscigno et al, 2006). For rural schools to reach high levels of student achievement, it is imperative that state and federal policies passed take into consideration rural districts based on their distinctive circumstances (Rural School and Community Trust, 2007).

### **The Need for Rural Education Research**

In 2001, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) estimated that approximately 7.2 million children live in rural areas with populations of less than 2,500 residents (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). In other words, one of every six school-age children attends a rural school and, as research suggests, the learning opportunities are quite different than those in urban and/or suburban schools (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). Even with this large rural school-age population, research regarding rural education issues is limited (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). Rural schools operate in environments that differ totally from urban and suburban settings; nonetheless, limited research has been conducted analyzing the problems facing rural schools (McCracken & Miller, 1988). In addition, community and cultural concerns affect rural schools more than urban schools because of the microcosmic setting in which they occur (McCracken & Miller, 1988) again highlighting the smallness of the community.

### *Endangered Species*

The latter part of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth century most Americans attended rural schools (Theobald, 1991). However, as historians recorded the educational developments in the United States in the first decade of the last century, they focused their analysis on urban school practices (Theobald, 1991).

According to Theobald (1991), 80% of research topics in the *History of Education Quarterly* have concerned urban education. Although today there is more research related to rural education, it is still difficult to find significant work on rural schools with a focus of research on the effects of rural education on American society. However, still missing is the call for rural research and the educational system to help us understand the value of rural educational settings and the suitability of small schools (Chalker, 1999; Theobald, 1991). Solid, reliable information pertaining to rural schools would increase their capability of presenting a combined and powerful rural America to legislators and other policymakers (Coladarci, 2007). Yet, rural education research is scarce to say the least as Sherwood (2000) calls the rural education researchers an endangered species. In addition, quite a bit of today's research on rural education seems to be a melancholy accolade to the small country schools of long ago. There also appears to be an attitude that rural schools and the country ways of life signify ignorance and provincialism (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). According to some who have monitored rural education research, the quality of rural research has suffered due to it being misunderstood, with little or no funding, and a serious lack of encouragement (Sherwood, 2000). Several studies have analyzed and identified noteworthy deficiencies in the national research

arena. These deficiencies include raw data concerning rural schools (Sherwood, 2000). The deficiencies of current and extensive syntheses of research in rural education are an obstruction to researchers; this situation also hinders the work of practitioners, policymakers, and others who wish to use the research results to update their information (Coladarci, 2007).

Rural research is necessary since rural schools often face severe economic and community resource constraints that place rural students at risk for academic achievement and lack of school success (Hardre, Crowson, Debacker, & White, 2007). In addition, rural schools serve students with various characteristics, including ethnic minorities, the socioeconomically disadvantaged, families without an education, and single-parent or absent-parent families (Hardre et al., 2007), which intensifies the need for rural education research. Rural education professionals express grief over the fact that the rural reforms of the last 50 to 75 years have been done “to” or “for” parents, teachers, and communities, instead of “by” them, which makes it challenging for the rural citizens, since they are generally not included when decisions are made in relation to rural schools (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999).

### *The Stepchild Syndrome*

Rural schools are considered a subgroup that is grossly underrepresented in education research, regardless of the needs of rural students and the often less-than-adequate conditions in rural schools (Hardre et al., 2007). Even though many American schools are located in rural communities and 18% of this country’s students attend rural schools, only 6% of the research conducted on education includes rural schools (Hardre

et al., 2007). Nationally, rural school strengths and needs have been ignored because in the middle of the problem lies the conflict over the purpose of schooling (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). As a result of said conflict, state and national education reform leaders generally call for schools to prepare their students to contribute to national interests while rural educators think rural schools should also tie into local community interests (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). In that way, a generalization based on nonrural research to rural schools is frequently inappropriate and lacks confirmation (Hardre et al., 2007), which shows that a “one-size-fits-all” approach to education is often detrimental to rural schools.

Repeatedly, the rural areas in this country have suffered from the “stepchild” syndrome in the national education research program, since the national research agenda has never satisfactorily identified or addressed issues specific to rural schools (Sherwood, 2000). Unfortunately, whenever research has been attentive to rural areas, it has usually been utilized only to get a representative sampling, rather than to obtain meaningful information about rural schools (Sherwood, 2000). Many researchers are too urban biased and fail to recognize rural communities’ qualities, which ultimately adds to the deficiency of rural education research. Currently, there is a need for more dependable information concerning rural schools which can bring to the forefront of legislative agendas rural issues. Without this impetus, these issues will continue to be overlooked (Sherwood, 2000).

In comparison to all education research, the studies that focus on rural schools are a small percentage (Sherwood, 2000). Unfortunately, rural school research has not had

consistent support by the federal government, nor has it had support from academic institutions for several reasons. These reasons include: a misunderstanding of urban-rural differences, academia prefers urban issues since there is virtually little or no interest revolving around rural education research; a small number of professionals use their careers to study rural education; disagreement exists regarding rural education's research priorities; and finally, the focus seems to center on the crisis connected with urban schools, as well as the attention of the policymakers (Sherwood, 2000). In view of the fact that today there are many issues, challenges, and changes impacting rural America, research should be generated and focused to create more attention on rural education (Sherwood, 2000).

America's schools must address the needs of rural education, because the Local Education Agencies (LEA) guide the governance of public schools. Furthermore, with rural and small-town school districts encompassing 63.8% of all public school districts in the United States, rural education is important on the national education scene (Howley, 2001). Simply put, the rural environment and rural schools are more common than most people realize (Howley, 2001). The rural environment or "circumstance" is not currently part of the perspectives of major university research or multinational business agendas. This is why it is up to rural education researchers to design studies involving economics, politics, history, and culture, while also incorporating what it is to be rural (Howley, 2001). Each individual educated in a rural school is profoundly shaped by the aforementioned structures that ultimately shape the institutions of schooling (Howley, 2001). As Howley stressed, "rural is real" and it should be studied objectively with



reflections on “rural economics, history, politics, and culture” (Howley, 2001, p. 12). Additionally, rural education professionals argue that if rural schools are to be preserved and improved, then reform efforts must center around rural schools’ strengths, along with their strong ties to local communities (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). By appropriately researching rural schools to give them the knowledge and skills necessary to further enhance their strengths, rural schools can be held accountable for the standards set by the community, state, and nation. Research suggests that real accountability is based on the community’s satisfaction with the schools and the students, whether they can succeed in the community and in society at large (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

Regardless of a history dominated by criticism and interposed by consolidation, rural schools still carry on as they serve about one-third of the nation’s children (Spears, Bailey, & Maes, 1992). Generally, rural schools are surrounded by strong community support, although they are isolated from one another and from an educational system that is unenthusiastic in its attempts to understand the nature of the rural schools and how they should be governed (Spears et al., 1992). However, in the last 20 years, interest in rural schools has grown, even though there is not nearly enough research in education to have made a significant impact on rural communities and their schools.

There have been several studies conducted to determine the perceptions of teachers, administrators, and parents for rural education research since rural communities encompass their schools and the schools encompass their communities (Wright, 2007). However, there are very few rural studies to determine students’ perceptions of their

rural schools. Most of the studies involving students focus on career aspirations and how they compare to the aspirations of urban youth (Demi, 2006). Therefore, rural education research is void of studies where all stakeholders of a rural school and community are research participants. Their perceptions toward rural schools have not been accurately addressed in rural education research. Rural education research has a significant responsibility to rural schools and communities to conduct complete studies that focus on the perceptions of all genres of stakeholders.

The time is now for rural schools to begin to teach from a broader spectrum to achieve a higher standard of success. The central focus of American educational politics, through NCLB, determined educational success is measured by achievement on standardized tests (Roscigno et al., 2006). Therefore, rural educators must look away from their ruralness and toward the rest of the country for curricular support in order to effectively meet the needs of their learners while successfully challenging the increasing demands of accountability.

In the near future, rural secondary school educators will have to change their mode of preparation, since they will need to look to the community to teach problem solving, higher order thinking skills, and entrepreneurship. Educators will soon need an understanding of rural economics and sociology, since school will eventually be involved in community development (Nachtigal, 1992). With the *No Child Left Behind* legislation becoming law, rural educators will need to learn how to use technology to access demographic data, information, and resources from all over the world (Nachtigal, 1992). The role of the rural educator has rapidly changed and its effect will filter into the

community served by the school. It is unknown whether this change is for the better, since only time will tell.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

\*\*\* was a mill town and she flourished in her prime.  
 But the big pines were soon were gone and she declined in time  
 To a small town in East Texas where the pace of life is slow  
 And the strains of families past are ebbing to and fro.

\*\*\*, you're a lady and you stand full of pride!  
 We can't resist coming when your arms are open wide;  
 \*\*\*, you're a beacon to the weary and the strong;  
 \*\*\*, Texas, USA, you are my home sweet home!

She's a small town with a big heart and she'll steal yours away;  
 Soon you'll be packing and coming here to stay,  
 Where the giant oak trees stand guard over all the fields and streams,  
 Where you can put down your roots and live out all your dreams!

\*\*\* is the home of the BIG RED FOOTBALL team!  
 "Hail, \*\*\* High School" is the song that we all sing;  
 We believe in God, apple pie, and mothers dear;  
 "Hello Neighbor!" and "Hi Y'all!" are sounds we always hear.

\*\*\*, you're a lady and you stand so full of pride!  
 We can't resist coming when your arms are open wide;  
 \*\*\*, you're a beacon to the weary and the strong;  
 \*\*\*, Texas, USA, you are my home sweet home! (Rasbeary, 1986, p. 84)

\*\*\* Name omitted to protect the community's identity.

### Introduction

The poem, though written in 1986, still reflects the general feelings of the residents of Pinewoods (pseudonym), Texas. This rural community, which is deep in East Texas lying in the heart of the Davy Crockett National Forest, has not changed too much in size and attitude since it was first founded in approximately 1881 (Hensley, 1986).

This town has been an influence on me since I was attending public school in the rival community nearly 20 miles away. In 1986, much to my chagrin, my sister accepted a teaching position at Pinewoods High School (pseudonym). Once I got over her obvious betrayal of our Alma Mater, I began to listen to her boasts of how wonderful this school and its community were. My friends and I used to tease her about teaching in “Utopia” or the perfect school. So, when this study came about, it culminated over 30 years of interest in this sleepy and almost dried up little community. My interest lies in why the residents and citizens of this town take so much pride in their school, which is the epitome of Texas football, rural education, and agriculture at its best. For the residents of Pinewoods, Texas, this is their story. See Figures 1-4 for photos of downtown Pinewoods.



*Figure 1.* The square in Pinewoods, Texas.



*Figure 2.* The back view of the courthouse in Pinewoods.



*Figure 3.* The view of downtown Pinewoods from the front of the courthouse.



*Figure 4.* The front steps leading into the courthouse in Pinewoods.

### **Brief History of Pinewoods, Texas**

Before the sawmill and railroad arrived, Pinewoods consisted of a few families, a pond, and a cattle pen where cattlemen branded their livestock (Hensley, 1986). In 1881, the railroad began to lay lines and when completed in 1882, Pinewoods became a stop for agricultural transportation along with individuals traveling in passenger cars.

During this same time, the lumber industry opened up in East Texas and uniting with the railroad, laid out the area soon to be the town of Pinewoods. From the late 1800s to roughly 1930, Pinewoods was a thriving community. However, the Great Depression hit this community hard and on December 31, 1930, the lumber company blew its whistle for the last time bringing an end to the most prosperous era in Pinewoods' history (Hensley, 1986). On the other hand, the community has managed to all but dry up with its one yellow blinking light and a population of 1,107 citizens.



Nevertheless, it has kept its vitality primarily due to the fact that Pinewoods is the county seat of Pinecone (pseudonym) County. As such, the community has been able to keep a large enough population so that with the smaller surrounding communities, a steady student enrollment allows the school to keep its doors open throughout the years. Still today, the school is the heart and soul of Pinewoods, Texas and is a key center of the community. The public school in Pinewoods was built around 1884 and consisted of a one room building. In 1895, the Pinewoods Independent School District was established and rapidly grew in student enrollment with the railroad and lumber industries. However, after the lumber mill closed and the railroad moved out of town, the student enrollment declined but has kept steady between 260 to 310 students in the high school. The current high school building (Figure 5) was built by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1939 (Bell et al., 1980) from rocks quarried in Pinecone County (Bowles, 1966).



*Figure 5.* Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School.



The public school in Pinewoods is the pride of the community. Pinewoods is one of a few towns in the south where community support for the school is consistent and always loyal instilling the morals and pride of every Pinewoods graduate from 1895 to present day (Young, 1986). The long-standing traditions surrounding Pinewoods High School result from the community and its citizens consistently maintaining high standards and loyalty while passing them down through the generations. Pinewoods High School has an ex-students organization that provides scholarships for graduates and helps to ensure the pride, traditions, and values are passed onto the next generation of Pinewoods students. So proud are they of their school and all who attend that in the 1980s, with the help of the ex-students association, the school erected monuments (Figures 6 and 7) around the flag pole for every war in which the United States has been involved. Each monument represents a war fought with all the Pinewoods alumni who courageously fought and died, again reflecting the tradition and pride that abounds the school, community and her citizens of Pinewoods, Texas as the following published in 1912 describes:

Few communities in the south have given their public schools a more consistent, intelligent, loyal and effective support. Few communities have ever derived a greater benefit socially, educationally and morally from the establishment and maintenance of a high standard of efficiency of public schools than has Pinewoods.

Into this new country site town, a farming and industrial community, came individuals and families representing the best culture and highest intellectual attainment and other elements of a strong but uncluttered class of people and these were brought together in the public school, and each vied with the other in seeking the honors that come from the pursuit of knowledge, the acquisition of culture, with the polish, grace and charm that come from social contacts under favorable conditions and from competition in high endeavor toward worthy aim;

and a community spirit and a community culture has resulted from this more than any other single influence, of which any American community could be well proud. (Bell et al., 1980, p. 117)



*Figure 6.* The war memorials honoring Pinewoods alumni who fought and died in World Wars I and II, Korea, and Vietnam.



*Figure 7.* Another view of the memorials honoring the brave men from Pinewoods who died in America's wars.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design and Rationale*

The theoretical framework for this study was basic interpretive in that “the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6).

While conducting this basic qualitative study, I sought to ascertain and identify with the perspectives and views of the participants (Merriam, 2002). Basic interpretive research comes from the idea that individuals interpret their experiences from the “perspective of the meaning it has for them” (Merriam, 2002, p. 37). As such, to perform a basic interpretive study, the researcher is interested in how the participants interpret their experiences, how they create their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2002). The entire purpose of this research is to “understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (Merriam, 2002, p. 38).

Basic interpretative qualitative studies are perhaps the most widespread type of qualitative research found in education (Merriam, 2002). For basic interpretative studies, data are collected through observations, interviews, and analyzing documents (Merriam, 2002). The data are then analyzed for common themes or patterns with a “rich, descriptive account of the findings” (Merriam, 2002, p. 7). The results of the analysis consist of a mix of common patterns that is supported by the existing data (Merriam, 2002). The researcher’s understanding is, in general, the interpretation that is mediated by his/her particular disciplinary point of view of the participants’ understanding of the

phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, the main objective of a basic qualitative study is to interpret the meaning of how people make sense of their lives and their worlds (Merriam, 2002).

### **Method**

The research followed a case study format (Stake, 2005). The study focused on a rural junior/senior high school in the Pinewoods Independent School District, Texas, and the perceptions of the faculty, administration, students, and community of what constitutes a successful school. The intent of the study was to determine what local stakeholders in the Pinewoods Independent School District perceive as a successful school model.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors determine success as identified by stakeholders in Pinewoods Independent School District?
2. How do stakeholders in Pinewoods Independent School District perceive success in their junior/senior high school?

The research presented in this case study is qualitative in nature. The research conducted concerned a small rural high school from a small East Texas community. According to Stake (2005), "For a research community, case study optimizes understanding by pursuing scholarly research questions" (p. 443). I chose Pinewoods Junior/Senior High School because I am a product of a similar small East Texas high school. I know this community well as it is just 20 miles from where I was raised. My sister is a teacher there, and her three children attended this school. Stake (2005) claims

that, “study is undertaken because an intrinsic interest in, for example, this particular child, clinic, conference, or curriculum” (p. 445). I chose this school because of my interest and curiosity of how they can be academically and athletically successful while being a rural school district operating on a small budget.

This qualitative study was conducted in a manner described by Bogdan and Biklen (1998) as “rich in description of people, places, and conversations, and not easily handled by statistical procedures. Research questions are not framed by operationalizing variables; rather, they are formulated to investigate topics in all their complexity, in context” (p. 2). Colardarci (2007) insists that the context of rural education research should be explained thoroughly through rich description rather than by a universally established definition for rural. As a qualitative researcher, I did not “approach the research with specific questions to answer or hypotheses to test” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 2). The purpose of this study fits in this framework for research.

### *Participants and Site*

During the spring, I visited Pinewoods High School, where I conducted interviews and observations along with an analysis of primary source documents to discuss the district and community’s perception of what makes a successful school. I interviewed the superintendent, high school principal, six teachers, eight community members, and eight students (two from each grade level 9-12). I asked the principal for help in setting up the interviews and to suggest the persons to be interviewed from his faculty and students. He provided me names of eight students, with two from each grade level (9-12). The students ranged in grade point averages, extracurricular participation,

and disciplinary histories. I met with the students on the first day and explained the purpose of my project regarding their high school. At that time, I provided them with parent permission forms (Appendix A) and the information sheet (Appendix B) to take home to their parents. I advised each student that I needed parent permission for their voluntary participation. When I returned to the high school the next day, all eight students had their permission forms signed by their parent/guardian and were more than willing to sit down and talk to me.

To get an appropriate sample of teachers I relied on the principal's help who sent an email to his entire faculty explaining why I was visiting and asked for volunteers to speak with me. In addition, he informed his faculty that I would be walking around campus observing the day-to-day operations of their school and their classrooms. Of the faculty, seven agreed to participate in my study. However, I had trouble with the audio tape interview from one teacher, which was insufficient for recording the conversation. Consequentially, I only addressed the six teachers whose transcripts and audio tapes were recorded properly. Out of the six teachers, only one was a Pinewoods alumnus and all but two teachers had over 15 years of teaching experience. One teacher was a first-year teacher from a large urban community and the other individual was a retired agriculture agent who was acting as a permanent substitute with the district for four years. While he was extremely qualified to teach at the high school, he was not a certified teacher. All the participants were given an information sheet (Appendix B) along with an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved consent form (Appendix C) for them to sign agreeing to participate in my study.

The community members who participated in the study were chosen through a purposeful sample. For this study a purposeful sampling, as described by Patton (1990) to identify and select those individuals to be interviewed, was used. Patton (1990) said this method is a primary qualitative research practice since the “logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information rich cases for study in depth” (p. 169). I visited two community service organizations and presented and explained my research effort regarding rural education, and how they could help me. I asked for participants to interview. However, instead of obtaining participants, I was provided with suggestions as to who would be ideal subjects with whom to discuss Pinewoods. I visited with the suggested individuals, explained to them my research, and gave them the information sheet and consent forms. Only one individual I talked to declined to be interviewed and the other eight agreed.

### *Data Collection*

All 24 participants were told the interviews would be audio taped and transcribed by a person I would hire. Once I returned home, I had trouble finding someone to hire to type the transcripts for me. I did hire an individual at the end of January who told me my transcripts would be ready the fourth week of March. When the time came, the transcripts were not ready and because of my schedule at work, I agreed to give a deadline of May 7, 2008. However, on May 9<sup>th</sup>, the transcripts were not complete and since I was on a timeline, I had to hire another person to complete the transcripts. Once all the audio tapes were transcribed, I returned to Pinewoods for member checks and follow-up interviews and observations. The principal was absent the day I returned for

the follow-up visit so I mailed his transcript to him for his review. He made his corrections and sent his transcript back to me through the U.S. mail.

These interviews were conducted to determine the participants' perceptions of what constitutes this school as successful and how it, according to the participants, continues to be successful through the course of time especially during the era of high stakes accountability. Several documents were analyzed such as the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) reports from the Texas Education Agency for at least five years along with newspaper articles and the Internet web sites associated with the school.

### **Interviewing**

“An interview is a purposeful conversation usually between two people ... that is directed by one in order to get information from the other” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 93). In depth interviews with administrators, teachers, students, and community members were conducted during the Spring 2008 semester. Each interview varied in time from 30 minutes to an hour. I followed a semi-structured interview schedule with the selected participants in this study. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) state that interview schedules allow for “open ended responses and are flexible enough for the observer to note and collect data on unexpected dimensions of the topic” (p. 71). According to Fontana and Frey (2005), “The most common form of interviewing involves individual, face to face verbal interchange, but interviewing can also take the form of face to face group interchange and telephone surveys” (p. 698). They also go on to state that group interviews “take different forms, depending on their purposes. They can be brainstorming interviews with



little or no structure or direction from the interviewer, or they can be very structured such as those in nominal/Delphi and marketing focus groups” (Frey & Fontana, 2005, p. 704).

Since my sister teaches at Pinewoods, I was welcomed onto the campus as if I worked there. The students felt comfortable with me knowing that my sister was their teacher and, according to the students interviewed, respected her as their teacher. The community members I interviewed had no qualms about talking to me as pride in their school is a big factor among Pinewoods citizens.

The interviews were conducted on the school grounds at a time agreed upon by the participants and researcher. Patton (1990) describes in detail the types of interview questions. Descriptions of these types of questions are listed below along with examples that are relevant to this study:

#### *Experience/Behavior Questions*

“These are questions about what a person does or has done. These are aimed at eliciting descriptions of experiences, behaviors, actions and activities that would have been observable had the observer been present” (Patton, 1990, p. 290).

1. Describe your experience at this high school.
2. What do you request of your students the first day they walk into your classroom?
3. As an administrator, what do you request of your faculty when they report to work the first week of school?
4. As a student at Pinewoods High School, what are the qualities present on this campus?

### *Opinion/Values Question*

“These are questions aimed at understanding the cognitive and interpretive processes of people. Answers to these questions tell us what people think about some issue” (Patton, 1990, p. 291).

1. Do you feel small schools are effective in providing a quality education?
2. Do you see this school as successful? Why?
3. Do you feel, as a community member, that your school provides a quality education for the children of your community?

### *Feeling Questions*

“These questions aimed at understanding the emotional responses of people to their experiences and thoughts” (Patton, 1990, p. 291).

1. How do you feel about your school’s status in today’s society of high stakes accountability?
2. What do you see as the best and worst qualities of this school?

### *Knowledge Questions*

These questions “are asked to find out what factual information the respondent has. The assumption here is that certain things are considered to be known – these things are not opinions and they are not feelings; rather, they are things that one knows, the facts of the case” (Patton, 1990, p. 292).

1. What were your TAKS scores on the 2006 administration of the exam?

2. Can you explain the discrepancy among your African American students' scores in math as compared to the higher scores of your Anglo students' math scores?
3. Where does your school rank in the Texas Accountability system?
4. Have your TAKS scores as reported by the AEIS affected the Average Yearly Progress report for your campus?

#### *Sensory Questions*

“These are questions about what is seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled. The purpose of these questions is to allow the interviewer to enter into the sensory apparatus of the respondent” (Patton, 1990, p. 292).

1. Describe your campus.
2. What is considered a good day on this campus?
3. What constitutes a crisis on this campus?

#### *Background/Demographic Questions*

“These questions concern the identifying characteristics of the person being interviewed. Answers to these questions help the interviewer locate the respondent in relation to other people” (Patton, 1990, p. 292).

1. Tell me why you became a teacher and why you decided to teach at this school.
2. Have you always attended Pinewoods schools?
3. Before you began working here, tell me about your background; for example, where did you go to college?

4. Why do you continue to teach here when you can make more money teaching at other nearby schools?

### **Confidentiality**

Before any of the interviews began, each participant was assured of his/her anonymity and that the confidentiality of his/her responses would be maintained. The assurance was spoken onto the audio tape recorder prior to the interview to verify that. The audiotapes and transcriptions are kept in a locked cabinet at the researcher's home.

### **Participants**

In order to attempt to understand what drives the community of Pinewoods, a brief description of each individual is presented. Each participant was assured that his/her response, insights, and experiences would contribute significantly to understanding the uniqueness of Pinewoods High School and its community. The participants ranged in age from 15 to 84 years and are from various backgrounds and ethnicities (Table 4).

The Institutional Review Board approved the research and each participant was given an information sheet and consent forms (the students received parent permission forms) before any interviews were conducted. Pseudonyms were used to guarantee anonymity. To ensure further confidentiality, the geographic location of this school district and community was generalized.

Table 4. Participant Profile

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Position	Gender
David Simmons	Adult	Anglo	Board Member	Male
Alfred Connor	Adult	Anglo	Principal	Male
Jackson Taylor	Adult	Anglo	Superintendent	Male
Mary Alice Lawson	Adult	Anglo	Teacher	Female
Kelsey Smith	Adult	Anglo	Teacher	Female
Willis Johnson	Adult	African American	Teacher	Male
Ann Colmes	Adult	Anglo	Teacher	Female
Corey Callahan	Adult	Anglo	Teacher	Male
Sandy Harper	Adult	Anglo	Teacher	Female
Brenda Jones	Senior	African American	Student	Female
Johnny Blake	Senior	Anglo	Student	Male
Jason Wayne Hudson	Junior	Anglo	Student	Male
Maria Moreno	Junior	Hispanic	Student	Female
Amanda Holbrook	Sophomore	Anglo	Student	Female
Jeff Garner	Sophomore	Anglo	Student	Male
Jose Villamil	Freshman	Hispanic	Student	Male
Kimberly Tyler	Freshman	Anglo	Student	Male
Laura Kyle	Adult	Anglo	Community	Female
Stanley Kyle	Adult	Anglo	Community	Male
La Wanda Baker	Adult	African American	Community	Female
Janie Castleberry	Adult	Anglo	Community	Female
Mabel Morris	Adult	African American	Community	Female
James Rushing	Adult	Anglo	Community	Male
Tricia Rushing	Adult	Anglo	Community	Female

*Pseudonym A, James Rushing*

James, an Anglo, was a recent graduate of Pinewoods High School and at the time of the interview was a freshman at the university. In high school, James participated in football, track, FFA, and UIL One Act Play. James' mother was a teacher at Pinewoods High School.

*Pseudonym B, Tricia Rushing*

Older sister to James, Tricia also graduated from Pinewoods High School and was ranked third in her class. Tricia graduated from the university Summa Cum Laude with a BA in Business Administration. Tricia was in graduate school for her master's degree while working full time.

*Pseudonym C, Alfred Connor*

Alfred, an Anglo, was the principal of Pinewoods High School. He was in his 28<sup>th</sup> year as an educator and in the middle of his fourth year at Pinewoods. He began his tenure at Pinewoods as an assistant principal and served in that capacity for one year before being promoted to the principal's position. Alfred stated that he felt comfortable at Pinewoods and said it was "a little bit like family." Although he seemed to settle into the Pinewoods community, he was still considered an outsider by many.

*Pseudonym D, Jackson Taylor*

Jackson, an Anglo, was the superintendent of Pinewoods Independent School District almost completing 4 years as the school's leader. Though Jackson had 30 years of teaching experience, not all had been at Pinewoods. He was considered a local since he was born and raised in a neighboring community. Jackson worked his way up the ranks to superintendent beginning as an elementary teacher at Pinewoods.

*Pseudonym E, Mabel Morris*

Mabel is an African American who moved to Pinewoods shortly after she married. She had four children all of whom attended and graduated from Pinewoods. Her youngest daughter was in the special education program.

*Pseudonym F, Mary Alice Lawson*

Mary Alice, an Anglo, was a first-year teacher straight out of college. She was a little out of her element since she was from a large urban high school. She moved to Pinewoods for the convenience of living with a relative. While she admitted to having some positive experiences at Pinewoods, she was having trouble adjusting to the ruralness and completely fitting in as a colleague with the established and highly experienced faculty.

*Pseudonym G, Brenda Jones*

Brenda, an African American, was a senior at Pinewoods. Brenda was born in a nearby city but raised in Pinewoods. She said after graduation she was going to study to become a Registered Nurse. She loved her hometown but doubted she would ever return because there are not enough opportunities in Pinewoods for a nurse. Brenda wants to work in a medium to large hospital.

*Pseudonym H, Janie Castleberry*

Janie was a divorced mother of two Pinewoods graduates. While she was married, she moved to Pinewoods from the Houston area because her husband was raised in Pinewoods and wanted to raise his children in the country. After her divorce, Janie decided to stay in Pinewoods.

*Pseudonym I, David Simmons*

David is a Pinewoods alumnus and was a school board member since 1993. He spent eight years as an educator but in 1978 decided to establish a business in Pinewoods.

*Pseudonym J, Kelsey Smith*

Kelsey, an Anglo, was a teacher at Pinewoods and had been since 1986. All three of her children graduated from Pinewoods and were enrolled in a university. Kelsey is considered “hometown” though she was raised in another community in the same county.

*Pseudonym K, Willis Johnson*

Willis, an African American, was a non-certified teacher at Pinewoods. He was a retired county agent when he started teaching four years prior to the interview. He had no plans to get certified to teach. Also, three of his four children graduated from Pinewoods.

*Pseudonym L, Corey Callahan*

Corey, a Pinewoods alumnus, was an Anglo teacher who taught the special education students. He did not live in Pinewoods and his children did not attend Pinewoods schools.

*Pseudonym M, Ann Colmes*

Ann, an Anglo teacher, had 36 years experience in education with 27 years at Pinewoods. She readily admitted she was “old school” regarding the use of technology in the classroom. However, her TAKS passing rate was consistently at 90% and above.

*Pseudonym N, Sandy Harper*

Sandy, an Anglo, had 29 years experience in education. She had been at Pinewoods for four years. Although she lived in a nearby community, she chose to teach at Pinewoods as “it has qualities” that she liked.



*Pseudonym O, Amanda Holbrook*

Amanda, an Anglo 10<sup>th</sup> grade student, was raised in Pinewoods and had plans to attend a university after graduation. Her older brother also graduated from Pinewoods. She felt that athletics got too much attention, and there should be “a bigger separation between athletics and the UIL” literary academic contests.

*Pseudonym P, Jeff Garner*

An Anglo sophomore, Jeff had attended Pinewoods since Kindergarten. He played baseball and was proud to be involved in the Building Trades class. He stated he had already signed with the U.S. Navy for after graduation in 2010. Jeff said he was a troublemaker in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and failed a few classes, but he decided to improve himself by behaving and getting passing grades.

*Pseudonym Q, Jose Villamil*

Jose was a Hispanic freshman. His parents were from Mexico, but he was born in Pinewoods and had been in school there since he was in Pre-K. As a first generation U.S. citizen, Jose has only known the East Texas area surrounding Pinewoods.

*Pseudonym R, Johnny Blake*

Johnny, an Anglo, was a senior at Pinewoods. He moved there when he was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Although he was an athlete, he focused on his grades, he was active in UIL Literary activities, and he ranked at the top of his class.

*Pseudonym S, Jason Wayne Hudson*

Jason, an Anglo, was an eleventh grade student. He had been attending Pinewoods for two and a half years, prior to that he attended a larger school south of Houston. He plans to join the U.S. Army after he graduates from Pinewoods.

*Pseudonym T, Maria Moreno*

Maria was Hispanic and in the eleventh grade. She moved to Pinewoods from California when she was 11 years old. Her parents were from Mexico. She was in the band and ranked at the top of her class.

*Pseudonym U, Kimberly Tyler*

Kimberly was an Anglo 9<sup>th</sup> grade cheerleader who participated in every female sport offered at Pinewoods. She was also an active member in the Student Council and, because of her grade point average was above 90, a member of the Beta Club. Kimberly was born and raised in Pinewoods.

*Pseudonym V, La Wanda Baker*

La Wanda, an African American, was a graduate of Pinewoods. La Wanda's oldest child was a senior at Pinewoods High School. After high school, La Wanda joined the military after which she returned to Pinewoods to raise her family.

*Pseudonym W, Laura Kyle and Pseudonym X, Stanley Kyle*

Laura and Stanley, Anglo retired married couple, were both alumni of Pinewoods High School. Laura was an educator for 44 years, 43 of which were at Pinewoods. Stanley was a local businessman and active in the community. Laura and Stanley were also very active in the Pinewoods Ex-students Association.

### **Research Design**

The study is a qualitative, singular case study as “it will concentrate on the one” (Stake, 2005, p. 444). The time spent concentrating the inquiry on the one may be long or short, but while there is concentration, this is a case study (Stake, 2005). The goal of the study was to understand the day-to-day operations and functions of the high school in order to effectively describe what the participants defined as a successful learning environment. “Coming to understand a case usually requires extensive examining of how things get done, but the prime referent in case study is the case, not the methods by which the case operates” (Stake, 2005, p. 444). Stake continued to say that case researchers:

Seek out both what is common and what is particular about the case, but the end product of the research regularly portrays more of the uncommon drawing all at once from

- the nature of the case, particularly its activity and functioning;
- its historical background;
- its physical setting;
- other contexts such as economic, political, legal, and aesthetic;
- other cases through which this case is recognized; and
- those informants through whom the case can be known. (Stake, 2005, p. 447)

A qualitative research method was used to gather data to define the perceptions of what constitutes a successful school by the local stakeholders of Pinewoods Junior/Senior High School.

### **Sampling**

For this study, the most important issues related to the school’s continued success while operating on a poor budget, low teacher salaries, and low teacher turnover rate.

This school, however, enjoys constant community support in relation to all of its functions from literary academics to athletics. Interviews were conducted with administrators, teachers, community members, and students to form the basis of research data.

A primary source document from the AEIS campus/district report for 2006 was used to describe the demographics of the district. Also mentioned were teacher salaries and average years of experience. Other documents examined included newspaper articles and Internet web pages from the district, school, teachers, and extracurricular sites.

According to Patton (1990), qualitative methods are made up of three types of data. These are “(1) in depth, open ended interviews (2) direct observation and (3) written documents” (p. 10). This study used all three methods. Since part of my study discussed the success of the students, direct observation of teacher-student interaction was necessary.

The research was conducted with personal biases in place. The primary bias was my love for my home area of Texas where I was raised from a child to my teenage years. Another bias I encountered is the fact that my sister has taught at this school for 22 years and she was one of the participants in my study. My niece and nephew, both alumni of Pinewoods High School, were also participants in my study and two of the seven community members interviewed. A third bias involved my teaching experience since I have always been employed by a very large high school and am not accustomed to the ways of small districts. “There are concerns that insiders are inherently biased, or that they are too close to the culture to ask critical questions” (Bishop, 2005, p. 111). A

conscious effort was made to control any personal bias while researching for this study so that this document clearly establishes the true story of this successful school as presented by its faculty and community.

According to Stake (2005),

Researchers routinely provide information on such topics as the nature of the case, its historical background, and its relation to its contexts and other cases, as well as providing information to the informants who have provided information. In order to avoid ethical problems, the case study researcher needs constant input from conscience, from stakeholders, and from the research community. (p. 459)

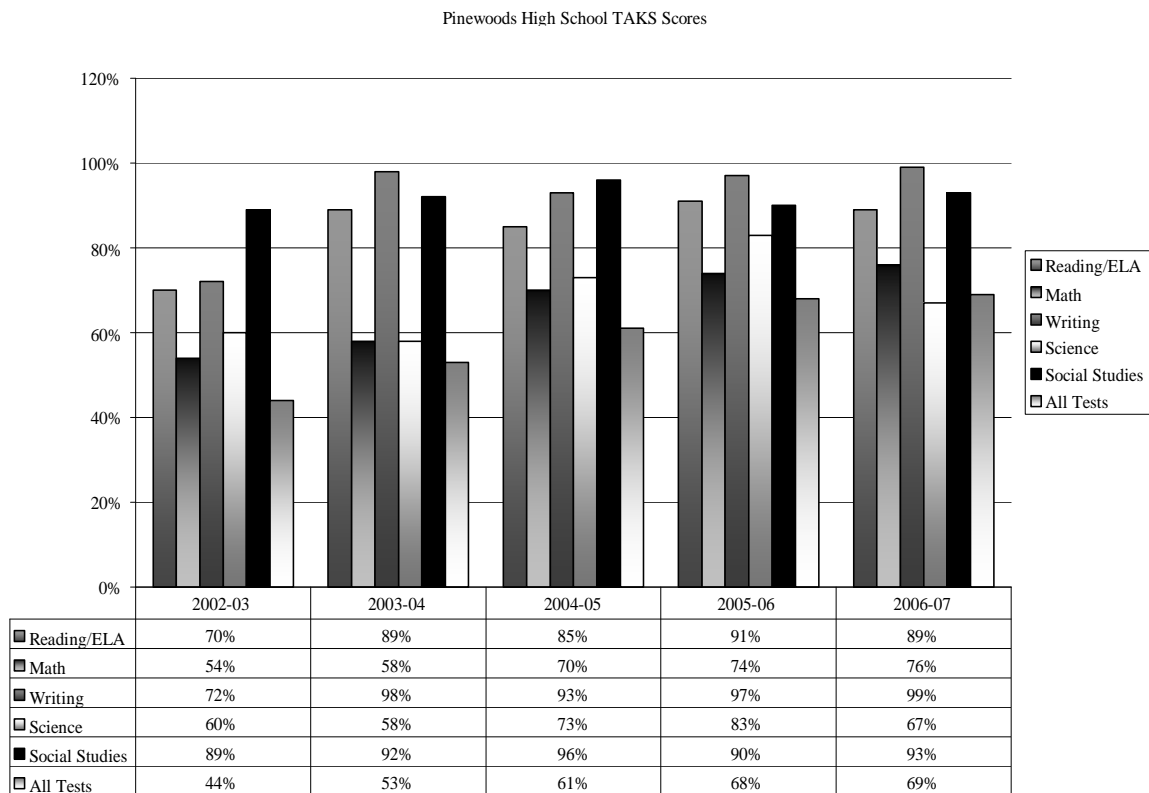
### **Documents**

My study used primary source documents. These documents helped me to establish effective and insightful questions for the interviews. Patton (1990) states that primary source document analysis provides a “behind-the-scenes look at the program that may not be directly observable and about which the interviewer might not ask appropriate questions without the leads provided through the documents” (p. 245). Primary source documents also help create questions and “reveal goals or decisions that might be unknown to the evaluator” (Patton, 1990, p. 233).

The primary source documents used for this study included five years of AEIS reports, the local and surrounding area newspapers, as well as Internet web sites for/about the district and/or school (Figure 8). The documents were used to help generate questions, support data from the interviews, and to follow the success of the school as reported in this paper.

According to the AEIS report provided by the Texas Education Agency, Pinewoods High School was rated Academically Recognized (Table 5) for two years

(2003-2004 and 2004-2005). While their scores continued to improve in the years 2005-2006 and 2006-2007, they were not considered recognized because the scores of the African American students fell below the state standard. The results of the TAKS tests and the school's rating has shown improvement when it is considered that the standards for the test were raised by the state each year it was administered. Therefore, as far as accountability is concerned, it is apparent the school was academically successful.



*Source:* Academic Excellence Indicator System, Texas Education Agency, 2008a.

*Figure 8.* Pinewoods High School TAKS scores.

Table 5. Pinewoods Academic Ratings

Year	Rating	Gold Performance Acknowledgments
2002-03*	None	None
2003-04	Recognized	Attendance 2002-03, Recommended High School Program Class of 2003, Commended on Writing, Commended on Social Studies
2004-05	Recognized	Attendance 2003-04, Commended on Reading/ELA Commended on Writing, Commended on Social Studies, Comparable Improvement Math
2005-06	Acceptable	Attendance 2004-05, Commended on Writing, Commended on Social Studies, Comparable Improvement Math
2006-07	Acceptable	Attendance 2005-06, Commended on Social Studies

*Source:* Academic Excellence Indicator System, Texas Education Agency, 2008a).

\*First year TAKS was administered statewide so there was no rating.

### Data Coding and Analysis

After the data phase of my research was completed, I began the task of the coding process looking for themes and subthemes to occur. A coding system was necessary to provide order of the data. “Coding is analysis. To review a set of field notes, transcribed or synthesized, and to dissect them meaningfully, while keeping the relations between the parts intact, is the stuff of analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 2005, p. 56). Bogdan and Biklen (1998) state that “certain words, phrases, patterns of behavior, subjects’ ways of thinking and events repeat and stand out” (p. 171). For this study, all coding was done manually by me where I looked for themes and key ideas to emerge. I created a code book in which all of the central ideas and themes were highlighted (Appendix D). The purpose for the code book was to simplify and to make sense out of the raw field notes and interview transcripts collected during my time with the participants (Patton, 2002). There must be classification to avoid confusion and chaos of the data (Patton, 2002).

“This is a tried and trusted method designed to improve the reliability of a research method” (Silverman, 2005, p. 50).

### **Trustworthiness and Validity**

Merriam (1995) states that every case has value and to study it produces information for a better understanding of a particular story. In this study, the results may or may not compare with other schools in the same situation. The insights I hope to reveal could contribute knowledge and lend facts to other studies of similar cases. According to Stake (2005), “Comparison is a grand epistemological strategy, a powerful conceptual mechanism, fixing attention upon one or a few attributes. Thus, it obscures any case knowledge that fails to facilitate comparison” (p. 457).

Furthermore, the trustworthiness of my study was based on thick description as Stake (2005) claims, “Readers with intrinsic interest in the case learn more about it directly from the description” (p. 458). Erickson stated the main characteristic of qualitative research is the centrality of interpretation (Erickson, as cited in Stake, 1995). “Given intense interaction of the researcher with persons in the field and elsewhere, given a constructivist orientation to knowledge, given the attention to participant intentionality and sense of self, however descriptive the report, the researcher ultimately comes to offer a personal view” (Stake, 1995, p. 42). Thick description “is not complexities objectively described; it is the particular perceptions of the actors” (Stake, 1995, p. 42).

Member checks were utilized to “strengthen the interval validity” of this study (Merriam, 1995, p. 54). This included taking the transcriptions of the interviews back to



the participants for them to read. This allowed them to see that what I had written was said and therefore true. “The purpose of this comprehensive check is not only to test for factual and interpretative accuracy but also to provide evidence of credibility – the trustworthiness criterion analogous to internal validity in conventional studies” (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, pp. 273-274). This member check is very important to the inquirers, the respondents, and the consumers of the case study report (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Triangulation through several sources and data collection methods was used to expand the trustworthiness of my study. According to Stake (2005), “Triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (p. 454). The multiple sources and data collection methods included interviews with administrators: one principal and the superintendent, six teachers, eight students, and eight community members as well as primary source documents. In this case, “triangulation will serve to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the case is being seen” (Stake, 2005, p. 454).

### **Conclusion**

This study utilized a qualitative design involving 24 stakeholders from Pinewoods ISD and citizens of Pinewoods including: 2 administrators, 6 teachers, 8 students, and 8 members of the community of a rural school district in Texas. I used purposeful sampling technique, with the high school principal’s assistance, to help identify the participants, and I met with each participant at least two times in order to conduct in-depth individual interviews lasting 30 minutes to an hour, in addition to the

pre-interview conducted to provide information and establish rapport. Data were manually analyzed and coded using a matrix developed around themes that developed from the data collected.

Unfortunately, there were several challenges met and corrected involving the typing of the transcripts. However, once that was resolved, the only other problem was when I returned to visit with the principal, he was absent though he had set the day and time for my return. While that was a bit frustrating, my return was not a loss as I was able to meet with all the other participants and communicate with the principal by mail. It was my expectation that the participants felt comfortable enough with me to give me honest and insightful responses which I truly believe happened. The next chapter includes the analysis, summarizing the interviews with a discussion of patterns and themes that surfaced, as well as quotations that support the themes.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Introduction**

This was a story of Pinewoods Junior/Senior High School, a small rural school and district with a long tradition of athletic and academic prowess. My original thought was to uncover the truth thereby, answering the question of “Is it really that great?” However, as the research progressed, I came to the realization that greatness isn’t necessarily in the scores received or the status placed upon districts by state and federal accountability standards. Greatness, it appears, is an attitude and one that was worth looking into with an attempt to understand or relate as to what motivates the community and school. I also discovered that based on the research presented in Chapter II of this paper, Pinewoods is most representative of the majority of this country’s rural schools and communities. And, like America’s rural schools, Pinewoods is most often overlooked by legislators and education researchers while having to adapt to the standards and regulations set by state and federal education agencies that focus mainly on urban schools and communities.

The research presented in this study is designed to document as accurately as possible the stakeholders’ perceptions of Pinewoods, Texas, and the school district involving historical accounts of their community, their school, and their traditions that have remained essentially intact since the founding of the school in 1895. The research for this study was guided by two distinct questions:

1. What factors determine success as identified by stakeholders in Pinewoods Independent School District?
2. How do stakeholders in Pinewoods Independent School District perceive success in their junior/senior high school?

The first question was centered on the Texas Education Agency's definition of successful schools that originated in 1984 when the Texas Legislature determined that student achievement was to be used as the basis for accountability. Before 1984 school accountability was checking districts to determine if their schools had been following rules, regulations, and proper educational practices. Through House Bill 72, passed in 1984, an accountability system was created based primarily on student performance (Texas Education Agency, 2008b). The current Accountability Rating System for Texas Public Schools and School Districts uses performance measures to assign a rating to every public school and district. Success for Texas Public Schools is determined yearly through the following performance indicators:

Results of Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS\*); by grade, by subject, and by all grades tested;

Results of State-Developed Alternative Assessment II (SDAA II);

Participation in the statewide assessment programs (TAKS/SDAA II/TAKS-I/TAKS-Alt);

Exit-level TAKS Cumulative Passing Rates;

Progress of Prior Year TAKS Failers;

Results of Student Success Initiative;

Results of Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills-Inclusive (TAKS-I); by subject; Progress of English Language Learners (ELL);

Performance-Based Monitoring (PBM) Special Education Monitoring Results Status;

Attendance Rates;

Annual Dropout Rates (grades 7-8, grades 7-12, and grades 9-12);

Completion Rates (4-year longitudinal);

College Readiness Indicators;

Completion of Advanced/Dual Enrollment Courses;

Completion of the Recommended High School Program or Distinguished Achievement Program;

Participation and Performance on Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) Examinations;

College-Ready Graduates;

Texas Success Initiative (TSI) – Higher Education Readiness Component; and

Participation and Performance on the College Admissions Tests (SAT I and ACT) (Texas Education Agency, 2008a).

These performance indicators are disaggregated by ethnicity, sex, special education, low income status, English Language Learners, and students at risk of graduating. Texas classifies the public schools, based on the indicators mentioned above, as Low Performing, Acceptable, Recognized, and Exemplary.

As I studied Pinewoods Junior/Senior High School, the two research questions were a constant for all the evidence studied and presented in this chapter. This is the story of Pinewoods and its citizens; it is their perceptions about their school; actually, it is my perception of their story as told to me.

I have to admit to being extremely nervous about going to the campus to observe and interview since I had never even attempted to do anything like this before, and I was

especially nervous because I was going to interview my most influential teacher from when I was in junior high school about 32 years ago. Also, I really didn't know what kind of reception I would receive from the students or faculty, much less the community. Although I know many of the teachers there, I still felt a twinge of stage fright as I drove to the school. I know that rural areas are not fond of outsiders coming into their community asking questions, and I worried I might not get truthful responses.

The first person with whom I met was the superintendent and I was able to schedule an appointment with him for the following day, and he told me to go to the school and meet with the principal. The central office, the junior high/high school, and the elementary are all on the same campus and within a five minute walking distance between each.

When I walked into the principal's office to check in, I was surprised to see how busy it was for such a small campus. People, mostly students and teachers, were going in and out of the office requesting information from the receptionist/secretary. This type of activity presented a very friendly environment with people laughing and smiling as they were preparing for the school day and the first day back from Christmas vacation. It was clearly obvious they are proud of their Indian mascot and what it means to the school as statues, dream catchers, and pictures decorated the small reception/office area. The first informative sign I noticed read "I only help one person a day. Today ain't your day, and tomorrow ain't looking any better." Despite the obvious grammar no-no, this set a rather comic but friendly atmosphere to this office, and I thought it was rather uncharacteristic of a public school. It was during this initial visit where I immediately felt welcomed by

everyone as people who did not know me greeted me warmly as if I belonged there. The entire area consisted of the reception area, the secretary's corner area, and two offices – one for the principal and the other for the assistant principal. While I was prepared to sign in and get a visitor's pass in order to have access to the campus, I was told since it was so small that a visitor's pass was not necessary. "Besides," I was told, "we know who you are." Okay, they did, but I wondered about the other 30 or so people who worked on the campus that did not know me! However, as I discovered, word travels fast and my presence was never questioned. On the other hand, it is important to note that when I returned for my follow-up visit about four months later, I had to sign in and wear a visitor's pass. The reason, I was told, was because they were being audited by Homeland Security and changes were in progress for the campus, such as all the classroom doors had to be locked during the school day, all the doors would have to be replaced during the summer because the windows in the doors would no longer be allowed, and all visitors would have to sign in to obtain a visitor's pass. These changes were not popular on campus but had to be accepted nonetheless.

This chapter discusses the themes that evolved from analyzing the transcripts, my field notes, and supporting documents regarding Pinewoods Junior/Senior High School. The participants' insights are discussed in relation to the themes developed. To review the characteristics of the participants, see Table 3.

When conducting the interviews, I asked the same basic questions in order to trigger responses that would lead the conversation into a more detailed description of the community and school. The charts posted under each theme illustrate the common

answers of the participants. In general, the common themes, which I will discuss at great length with supporting dialogue from the participants, are the rural advantage, pride and tradition, and the quality of the school, all of which ultimately answer the question, “Is this a successful school?” according to the perceptions of the stakeholders. The names of the people and community were changed to ensure anonymity, and I use the participants’ pseudonyms when quoting their responses.

### **Rural Advantage**

The ruralness of the community is presented here as a theme because as the interviews progressed, the basic ideas, insights, perceptions, attitudes, and responses in general all surrounded one basic thought: rural community (Figure 9). Most of the responses contributed the size of the community as reflecting on the attitude of the school. The general feeling is that rural community thoughts and ideas are unlike any other and, therefore, add to the morality and overall persona of the school. It is in this community where the Pinewoods Junior/Senior High School was established, molded, and remains as the center of all activity for this rural area. It is the school that keeps the community alive, and it is the community that makes the school what it is.



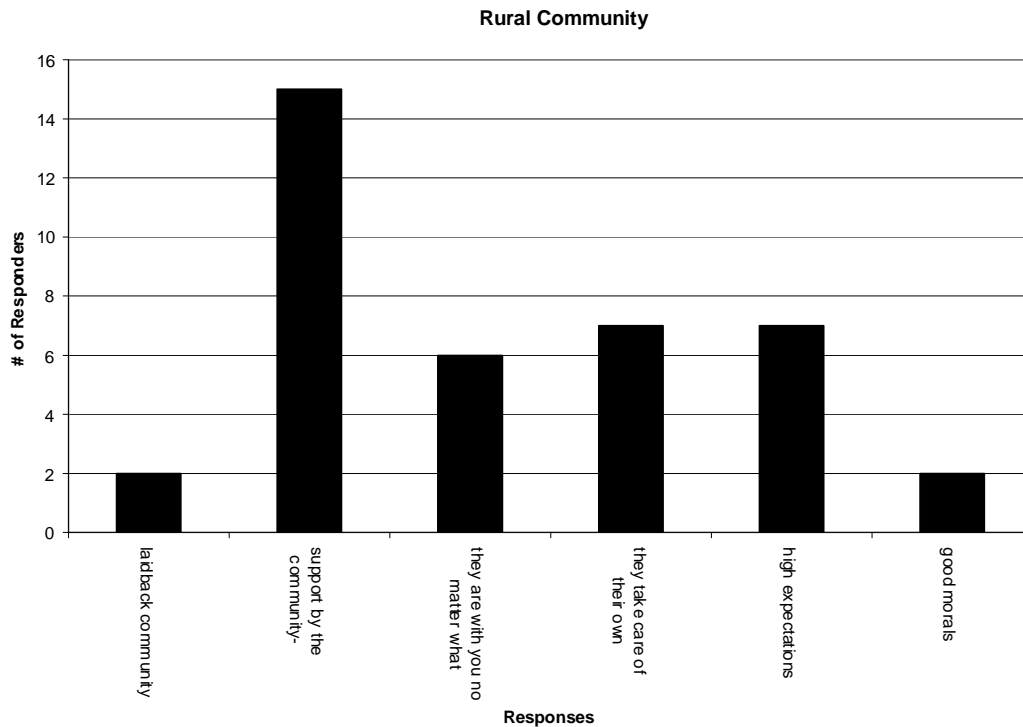


Figure 9. Rural community.

### *Community is Safe and Supportive of Its Citizens*

*Sandy Harper* who has only taught in Pinewoods four years described Pinewoods

somewhat fondly as illustrated below:

It has some good qualities that I really like. The kids are very good and you get to know the kids and their families; umm, it's a small community so you really get to know the families that you're working with, their backgrounds. I think what creates the good kids is that it's a small community and you get to know the family. So if so and so don't behave in class and you see their mom at the store, you tell her and the response is, 'I'll take care of it.' So you know the discipline will be handled at home. We have a lot of farming areas and ranching areas – agriculture. So you know, I guess we have that idea of the little farms as the good way to raise your kids without getting them involved in drugs and all the gangs and the bad habits. Ah, I don't know; it doesn't completely do away with those things though. You got people coming in from the lake, and lots of people don't have good backgrounds. I just hope that our good old boy values will override those other influences they get.

Board member *David Simmons* had this to say about Pinewoods:

The community does support the school. We have always had good support as far as attendance in competitions. It appears that the community supports the administration and the board having done a good job because we have a budget and every year we have to maintain it to maintain our facilities. And since I've been on the board for 15 years, we have never had one person complaining about the budget. With that in mind, I would say the community as a whole supports the school. If they didn't they would be up there asking why are you doing this and why are you doing that, and we have never had any problems of any kind with this. There isn't anybody out there trying to perform a tax rollback. I mean the things that I've seen since I've been on the committee, is that everything is all for school.

Teacher *Kelsey Smith* described Pinewoods as:

Well, they're a very laid back community; they believe in good morals not on the whole, not everybody is good, but on a whole as a community. They still believe in good morals. They expect their children to behave properly. They expect them to succeed in whatever their goals are. They also are strong in discipline in the school that is probably other than the fact that they want their kids to be educated; they are strong in backing the school with its discipline plan because they are aware of the fact that without discipline at school then, the learning environment deteriorates. They feel pride in their school and are very supportive of the school.

*Laura Kyle* described Pinewoods as patriotic as indicated by the war memorials placed around the flag pole at the high school (Figure 6 and Figure 7). She told me the newspaper weekly publishes the successes of the students participating in everything offered, thus illustrating the support provided to the school by the community.

Siblings *Tricia* and *James Rushing* saw Pinewoods being such a small community as a positive, thereby reflecting onto the school. *James* stated:

I found that going to school in a small town, you're able to co-act, to co-interact with everybody. You know everybody basically grows up with everybody; a lot of teachers there have watched you grow up. Um, they know you as you enter high school; they know a lot about you. They already know what kind of person you are; also, there's more because there's less people and at a small school, you're able to be involved in more activities.

Adding to this, *Tricia* stated:

I had many positive experiences and I agree with James on the fact that you're able to get to know your teachers better. Pinewoods is very supportive of the school. I mean Pinewoods is very football oriented. I mean the whole town is all about football. All about football, but, also on one side, they are very supportive of the UIL. The Academic UIL, like I was in spelling all four years of high school, and we went to state. The school supported us all; they made sure we had, well not special privileges, but you know we were; they supported us.

In order to clarify and emphasize the community support of the school more,

*James* commented:

The community is really involved in school. Every time we have a school function or a school fundraiser, the community really comes out and supports us. Because a lot of people from Pinewoods, who have either lived in Pinewoods their whole lives or they have moved out, retired and came back, so everybody is really involved with the school. Ah, you take a lot of the older men; they are very involved with the football team. They come to watch the practices; they come to watch the football games; really they are at every athletic function that we really have there. It's real nice to know that you're supported by the community; you know you're not just out you know. When you're in football practice and you look up, you see 30 to 40 people watching you. You know it kind of makes you feel good how you're important enough to them to take time off their day just to watch practice. You know that's not even when you're in your best state, but they want to just watch you and see how you perform and it's ah, it's very positive. It makes you feel good.

I kept referring to the community in my conversation with *James* and *Tricia* in order to get a clear understanding of the community of Pinewoods. What I experienced when interviewing *James* and *Tricia* was a fondness about Pinewoods and common among all of the participants was a description of their positive experiences from living in a rural community (Figure 10). Unless you have been there, lived there, or grew up there, you may not understand what this community is all about. So I pressed on because I want my readers to feel they know this community and all its qualities.

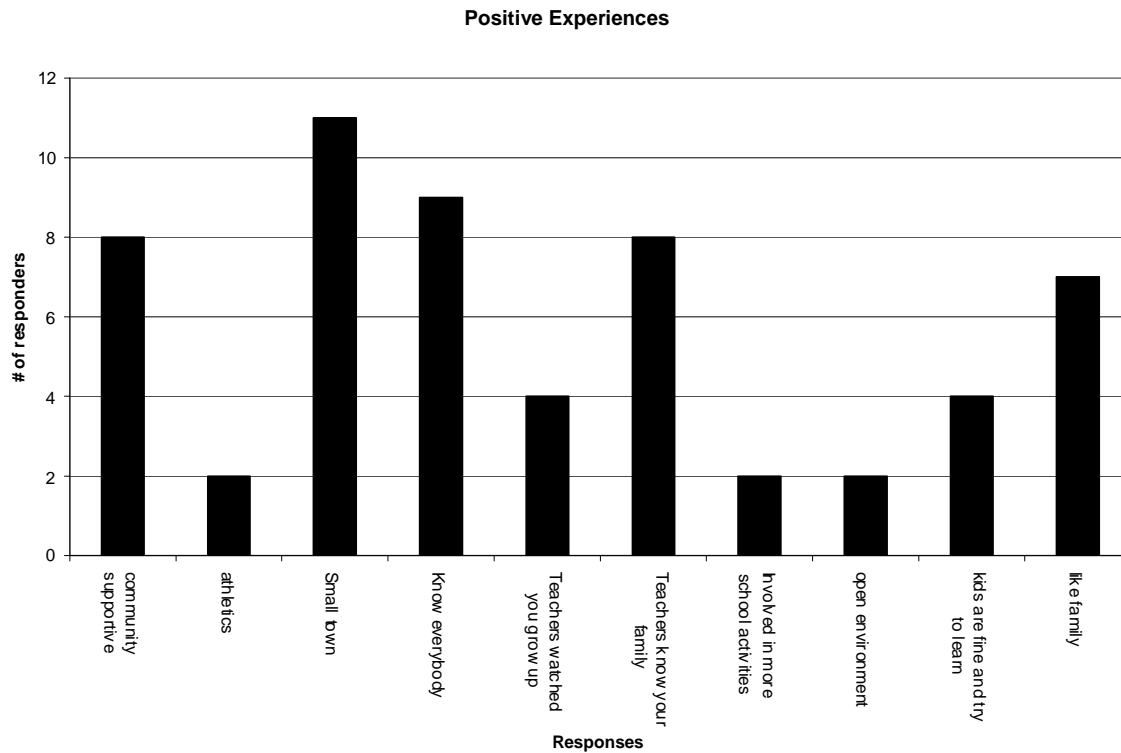


Figure 10. Positive experiences.

I asked for more information regarding the community and *Tricia* responded,

It's a pretty, it's a small community; it's a friendly community; ah, there's like, there's the community; there's stuff outside the school like the Lions Club; and they hold different fundraisers to help out different people and the community. And any time the Lions club holds a fundraiser, the community is right there to help.

Freshman student *Jose Villamil* stated he really liked Pinewoods as indicated by the following comments: "There's not a bunch of problems other than like speeding and all that stuff. It's actually kind of peaceful." I asked *Jose* why he thought Pinewoods was the way he described and he responded, "I really don't know. I think basically the people." This was a common answer among all the participants, once again reflecting on

the citizens of Pinewoods that ultimately leads to the town's personality and attitude based on its moral characteristics as a whole.

*Lack of Racial Tension in Community*

I then wanted to hear about race issues. Were there any in the community? Both *James* and *Tricia* responded no to this question, although they felt if there was prejudice around, it would be on a smaller level, and it is not something that is openly out in the public. I asked similar race questions to all the participants, especially since I had an ethnic mix of individuals. Most of the answers, though they varied somewhat, were the same: No real race issues exist here. Teacher *Willis Johnson* responded to my question of race issues in the community with:

Race relations? I don't see that as a problem here and believe me, if it was....I think I would know. I see students getting into 'squabbles' with one another but since I've been here, I can acknowledge that I have never seen racial issues between the students. Now we had some issues with the Klan coming to town, but it did not change the kids' relationship with each other. Teachers...I have no problems whatsoever. None that I am aware of...none whatsoever. Students-teacher relationship based on race...I haven't noticed any. We would see a difference in our young black males' attitudes and academics if more positive black adult males were around. When we talk about discipline in terms of black teachers...black teachers deal with black kids a little different. It may be because we don't really worry about what they tell mama or daddy. They (black students) can't come in here and say I'm discriminating because I'm black. I wonder sometimes do white teachers think that if they lean on black kids, they will be labeled a racist or hard on black kids. They (black kids) see through it; they see right through it. No, race relations has not been an issue, not yet.

A parent of four Pinewoods graduates, *Mabel Morris*, answered the question of race in the community by reflecting on her daughters' experiences while they were in high school:

I really don't think so. I can't say whether or not. I had one daughter that she was the only black in the classroom, so she never told me that she had any problems or anything. She got along great with the rest of her classmates. I would say not with my children; I don't think that there ever was, and I think a lot of that has to do with mostly what the parenting, in going through, if you feel like there is a problem you could always walk away. Walking away does not mean you are a coward. That's always been my motto. My grandmother always told me that it's best to say "there she goes than there she lay"; so I guess it would be with that.

Senior student *Brenda Jones* told me, regarding race issues in the school and community, that:

Sometimes you kind of feel that but it could be just you, and it's not really what you think it is. It could be just you and not that person; so, I wouldn't say I had a lot of problems with that.

However, teacher *Ann Colmes* emphasized that:

Race is always an issue to a certain extent but I would honestly say that you could ask 99% of black kids and ask if they feel that a teacher treats them differently because of their race, and they would say no. The kids sort of segregate among themselves but then again there are, you know, interracial relationships.

I then asked if interracial relationships were accepted in Pinewoods and she replied:

Not particularly, no. As a matter of fact, I've been upset about that. No, I mean you'll hear in the lounge that so and so...is amazing to me. I mean we did have this one teacher who was married to a black man and he was a teacher here. He passed away as a matter of fact and they had two children that are in school here and are biracial. They think they are accepted, of course, but by the kids. But they are more accepted by blacks than they are by the whites. But really, I don't think that has popped up maybe a little here and there. I mean like there is a girl in high school, I don't have her, but her grandfather has written a couple of letter to the editor that he thinks that she's being mistreated because she's black. That kind of thing. But really, I don't think race is a huge problem here.

And *Janie Castleberry* who works at the city hall felt that there were no race issues present in the school or community because:

They are all taught that you know, that we're all equal and to always treat a person like they treat you. I see that where I work.

And yet from another perspective, parent *La Wanda Baker*, discussed race relations in the community by reminiscing about the day the Ku Klux Klan decided to hold a rally in Pinewoods. She told me in answer to my question, "Were you ever challenged by race issues here?"

Yes, four years ago, and it was odd and awful because we never had that issue. We never had anyone come at us like that. We can't get along and I did something that I might have gone overboard. Whatever I believe in, is not what they believe in and they have the right to see that. When you look at them and look at me, everyone is different and it doesn't have to be like that. We can all be the same. Yes. My boys got a chance to see the KKK. They came to town. That day we were advised to stay out of Pinewoods. That day I drove my boys \*\*\*\*\* and \*\*\*\*\* through town and by the court house. I told them how those men were coward and weak and that we are all the same no matter color, race, or gender. (\*\*\*\*\*=names omitted to protect anonymity)

*Stanley Kyle* recalled the KKK incident as a bust because no one showed up for the rally. When I asked why, *Laura* stated it was not popular and the community saw it as negative. Pinewoods is a cohesive community that seems to not participate in outside activities such as what the KKK was trying to bring into the town square. *James* commented that, "Pinewoods takes care of her own."

One interesting fact regarding Pinewoods and race relations came from *Stanley* after I asked him when Pinewoods integrated. He stated, "in the early 1960s." *Laura* added, "They were not forced in; our school board just told them that they were closing the black school, and that they would all come to the white school. There was no criticism about it, and that was a couple of years before it would have been forced to integrate." *Stanley* added, "And they had good teachers in the colored school, a good

principal, and they just moved in without any problem.” Laura stated that there was “no problem whatsoever.” Although the *Kyles* felt the school and community diversified, *Laura* was quick to explain that the community is not very integrated; “they live over in their area and we have not integrated very much in their housing, but there are some who are right up close in town who live in houses. I think the churches are by there and they like to be together.” *Stanley* commented that, “The younger, some of the younger people come down to our church.” *Laura* added, “Some of them do, not too many of them. Some of them do and they can, they’re welcome at our church and they always have been.” So while Pinewoods may be racially comfortable, there is still a line of distinction that separates African Americans and Anglos. It appears that this is not a significant issue in Pinewoods, as the community is rather cohesive. Furthermore, if there are major problems, none surfaced in any of the participants’ interviews.

### *A Nurturing Community*

In regards to the community, the general comment from the student participants was that it was small, cohesive, great, but only one of the eight students wanted to return to Pinewoods after high school. When asked why, all of the responses were because of limited job opportunities. Some of the students wanted to go into the medical field, business field, and military. They were all extremely fond and grateful for being raised in Pinewoods, but felt they could not live there to raise their families. Only one student expressed a desire to remain in Pinewoods after high school. *Jose Villamil* stated,

Well, some people might think it’s small, but for me, I think I don’t even know where it ends. I think Pinewoods is pretty cool. It’s like kind of peaceful because



I really don't know where it ends. I'm pretty happy right now. I'd like to stay up here because there's not really a lot of problems.

Based on my observations, the interviews with all the participants, and the community in general, Pinewoods represents ruralness at its best. It is because of what I heard and witnessed that I can support my opinions regarding this unusually cohesive community. As a result of the overall outlook and wholesomeness of Pinewoods, it would seem then that it is a great place to live and raise a family. This attitude filters down to the school and its students, thereby creating a perceived atmosphere that is positive, creative, caring, and nurturing for all who attend school in this community.

According to *Willis Johnson*,

I guess we are satisfied. It's interesting; in some communities when you speak of change, some people see it as anti-establishment. He or she is going against the system and that's not necessarily how I look at it. New blood and new ideas sometimes is good. Every community we've lived in had a diversified school board. I would like to see our administration diversified....The only way that I see change is that the community demands it. I want to see some change like we talked about like some diversity in administration and the school board. We need people to vote. Maybe if you experience change in one area, perhaps it will spill over to other things throughout the district.

Common to rural communities is the feeling of satisfaction with the status quo. Many residents of rural communities fear change and fight anything that they perceive will ruin their way of life. Pinewoods seems somewhat stagnant and its citizens may resist any type of change to their school and community, particularly if they think it will change their long standing traditions or alter the pride passed down from previous generations of Pinewoods citizens.

### **Pride and Tradition**

Pinewoods' mascot is the Indian; with that comes, according to the participants, pride and tradition. Since it was established in 1895, citizens of Pinewoods have emphasized their ruralness, smallness, pride and tradition as all positives to living, working, and attending school there. Principal *Alfred Connor* told me he really did not know complete answers to what makes Pinewoods unique other than "It's a little like family." He said that pride is carried throughout the community and his faculty that filters down to the students. "They want students to do well and be kind of competitive. And they are supportive because they want student success." (Figure 10)

Superintendent *Jackson Taylor* added to this statement by elaborating the well-known fact among the community and faculty that,

We have high expectations for our students, and it's just something that kind of through the years, we like to think of ourselves as being the best school in the area. Our faculty looks to that to work continuously and make sure our kids are doing well, and our kids have a lot of pride in what they do. Well, of course, from a small rural school we don't have a lot of funds to sometimes work with. We always say here in Pinewoods that we will provide you with what you need and we don't have many perks, a lot of thrills that you might get in a larger school district. Sometimes the facilities may be old. We do with what we've got and I guess it's just become an expectation. It's just a tradition that has been built here.

#### *High Expectations and Competitive Nature of School*

High expectations, competitive nature, dedication, and community support were the general sub-themes from my conversations with all the participants surrounding what is most known about Pinewoods: pride and tradition. School board member *David Simmons* never minced any words in our conversation as he told me the following:

For years, the Pinewoods schools have been very, very competitive in athletics and the literary events. And I think that's basically because of the success of the athletic programs. The principals have really impressed upon the teachers that we need to be competitive in literary events and scholarly events. These teachers have taken upon themselves to allow their students to be known for their literary and scholarly events and not just athletics. I think that the years and the teachers have taken a real sense of pride with it.

When asked if the school has maintained its tradition and pride, *David* responded:

Yeah, as far as the competitiveness in the school, as far as the academics, I think throughout the years, I mean I graduated Spring of 1965, and I taught here in 1977-78. I got on the school board in 1993, and you know I think through the years the school has really gotten more competitive over all. And I don't know, I mean the administration has always made it clear on everybody to be competitive and I think throughout the years it has just gotten better and better. I don't know. I think it's just the pride in the school and the teachers getting paid to do the job. You're doing it because you love to do it and it gives you a sense of achievement. I am really proud to say that I think that the school still has that.

In almost every conversation with the participants, pride was a constantly mentioned, whether we were discussing the community, teachers, students, salaries, academics, or athletics. *Kelsey Smith* consistently stressed that Pinewoods has a long standing tradition of pride which, she said, is what kept her teaching there so long.

*Kelsey* stated,

I continue to stay here, because of the pride that this school has....It has nothing to do with money I can tell you that much. It is because of tradition, pride in school, discipline, expecting good characteristics, honesty, dedication, and responsibility.

### *School Pride*

*Corey Callahan*, alumnus and teacher at Pinewoods, also told me there was a lot of pride surrounding the school, which is emphasized by the overall competitive attitude

of the school. He said that has never changed and it is expected. Corey said that when new teachers join the faculty,

We try to make sure that they understand that ‘Hey this is a pride thing.’ Whether it’s a pride in athletics or pride in academics, we make sure that this is when you put on that Pinewoods shirt or that Pinewoods jacket or whatever you’re wearing that means something rather. It always has academics and athletics it always means something. And we make sure that hey, if you’re going to stay, you got to know it means something you know. And if it don’t mean anything to us, it’s not going to be anything for those kids.

*Corey* was not alone in that thought which, according to the experienced faculty, is a positive. However, when I talked to new teacher *Mary Alice Lawson*, she was less enthusiastic about the “pride and tradition” thing as illustrated below.

I have picked up on that they’re very much into Pinewoods; we are into red; we are into football; we are into it. I am not like that. That’s where I kind of feel like an outsider. I am into the students, not the school, and that may be a bad thing and part of my inexperience. But I feel like I’m more about students and not the school.

While *Mary Alice* was virtually alone in this thought, her insights are important to note because she said she felt like an outsider. She mentioned that if she felt that way, “what about the students who also feel the way I do?”:

I feel like there’s enough of the teachers that are just like the community, just like the school, and I feel there’s some students that are being left out of that. I think that the students who excel at school, who have pride in being here, that want to learn, do great. This is all obviously not with every teacher, and just what I’ve seen from how some of the things are worded or how some of the way things are done, some of the students are just being pushed through so that they can say they have an education, but I think they are capable of so much more.

As for the students, all eight of them stressed the pride they felt in their athletic program, particularly the football team, along with their academic program. *Jeff Garner* outright stated, “I love this school because I have been part of it for a very long time.”

*Johnny Blake*, who moved to Pinewoods when he was a freshman, felt the best quality of the school was the spirit as illustrated by, “As far as the athletic program, they take big pride in athletic programs. As far as academics, they expect to win big in UIL events.” These comments emphasize what had already been quoted by the superintendent, principal, and several teachers; i.e., it is a “pride thing” and it is expected. It amazed me that no one questions it; it is what is and that is it. As mentioned and illustrated earlier, those that do not buy into the pride, tradition, and excellence do not adjust well to Pinewoods and generally do not stay long.

Student *Maria Moreno* told me she had some difficulty in adjusting to Pinewoods after moving with her family from Anaheim, California. However, like Johnny, she said it is all in the expectations passed down from the community, to the administrators, to the teachers, and finally to the students. She said:

I love the school; it’s taught me so much. I have always been a very good academic student, and it has just helped me advance so much from where I already was, and I have so many friends here, I just got accustomed to everyone. I think its (Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School) academic level, it’s really good because the standard of it is really high and the teachers expect a lot from everyone and not just one person, and that’s what I think is most important.

Of all the interviews, the most enjoyable, impressive, and insightful conversation occurred with *Mr. & Mrs. Stanley* and *Laura Kyle*. Both individuals are well into their 80’s and extremely knowledgeable about the history and workings of the Pinewoods community and schools. Part of this knowledge base is due to their community activity, being born and raised in Pinewoods, and *Laura* retired in 1986 after teaching at Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School for 43 years. I utilize part of my conversation with the

*Kyles* to conclude this section on pride and tradition because since they have lived in Pinewoods all their lives, their insight is powerful evidence as to why Pinewoods continues after 113 years with very little change in the community and school. It is because of what I learned while visiting with the *Kyles* that gave me a greater appreciation of Pinewoods, while adding some validity to the reasons I chose this school and community to study. *Laura* told me in relation to pride and tradition:

I think that the community is proud of the high schools; they're proud that they can win football games and basketball games, but they're not as good. They've had some really good teams in basketball. And, they're proud that they can win UIL literary. I think that means a lot to the whole community.

Adding to the pride of the community regarding the schools, *Laura* continued referring to the successes of the students by stating,

Well, I have been pleasantly surprised really that most of our kids who go to college make good grades.....Good grades are really a matter of pride. Now they would like to win in football, and win in this and UIL and so on. But if they were making good grades, they usually were making good in other aspects of the school: good citizens, good students. It's pride that does it and I think that it's a matter of respect for each other, and a matter of pride in their accomplishments.

Much to my surprise, one week after my initial visit to Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School, a brief summary was printed in the community's weekly newspaper regarding my research and future case study of Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School. I include the entire article here, as it is an exact summary of the evidence presented thus far as to why there is pride and tradition prevalent here. It seems to come down to one thing: respect and why it is a never ending philosophy for this school and community:

It was my pleasure last Saturday to be interviewed by a doctoral student, Miss Jerri Centilli, as part of her work in preparing her doctorate thesis. She is searching and researching the subject of what makes a small rural school such as

Pinewoods (pseudonym) to be ranked as one of the “Best Schools in Texas” (here the paper is referring to the November issue of the *Texas Monthly* which listed Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School as one of the best schools in Texas). I was more than happy to cooperate with my ideas.

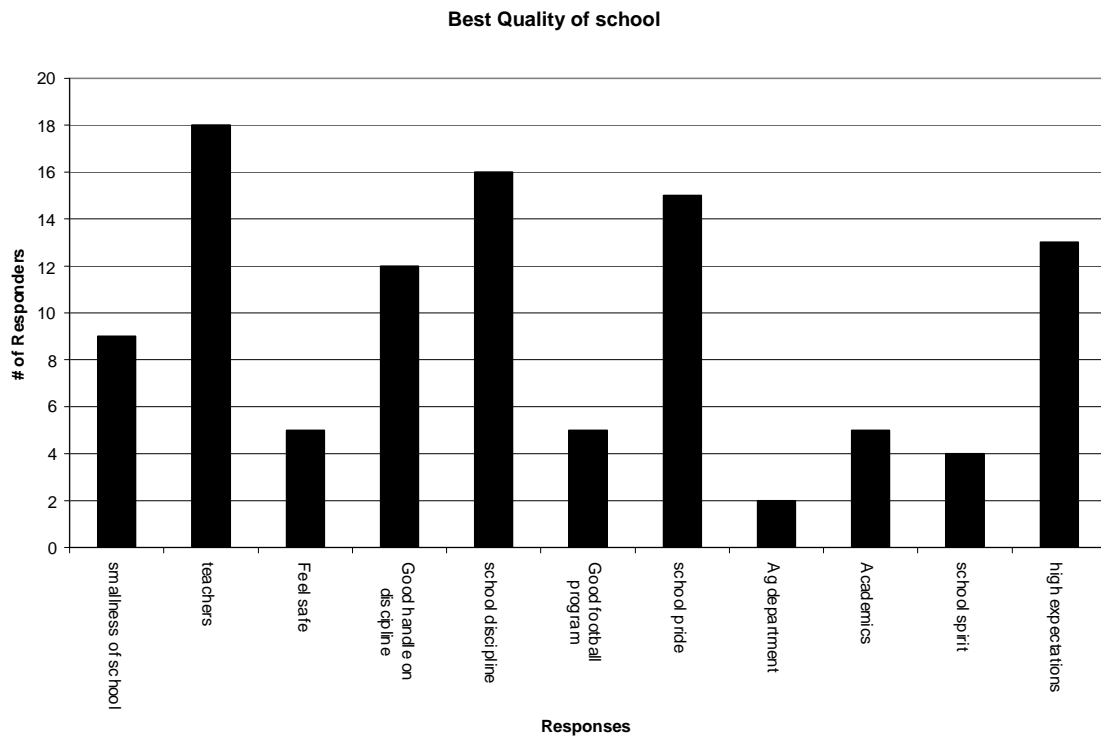
My thoughts came down to one word: “Respect.” It is my opinion that the voters and parents elect school board members whom they respect. Then the school board members elect teachers whom they can respect and trust with the lives and education of the students. In their turn, the students have teachers whom they can respect and trust that they are in good hands. The teachers trust the administration to make good decisions and respect them for it, and then they all respect each other. The students will respect their teachers for their teaching abilities, their sincere care for the students, and the teachers’ moral and personal values. It is transmitted through the daily interactions that can be depended upon to be respectful toward each other.

This may appear to be too simplistic, but I have 44 years of experience to back it up. There must first be respect between individuals, an unmistakable caring and desire to be the very best one can be in each situation. Respect is developed in a respectful environment. Disrespect for anyone must not be allowed to function in the respectful environment. It must be eliminated as quickly and as respectfully as feasible in the given situation. This is not always easy. (Terry, 2008, p. 3)

### **Quality of School, Pinewoods Style**

As all the interviews progressed, I began to draw several conclusions about the community, school, and the individuals who make up the school from the administration down to the students. There were various common points made by all the participants that evolved around the quality of the school. All of the participants felt a great deal of ownership in their school and a deep sense of appreciation for what they have received from the school – whether it was a community member, teacher, or administrator. The quality of school was selected as a theme based on the evidence presented from the interviews and observations (Figure 11). This section was broken down into various sub-

themes that genuinely reflect on the entire picture: good discipline, good teachers, competitive nature of the school, extracurricular activities, and school success.



*Figure 11.* Best quality of school.

### *Good Discipline in School*

Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School is one of the few schools in Texas that still allows corporal punishment or paddling students. This is one of the key elements in keeping the discipline in control for Pinewoods. While evidence across this country defies the use of corporal punishment in schools, there was not one participant who saw it as a negative.

*James Rushing* recalled “being paddled on the butt by a board” as something that was deserved. He explained to me that paddling or pops were usually given for



Being overly active in class more than what the teacher wanted – like talking or acting up. It's real; I mean I can think paddling is the way to go so the kids, it keeps people more in line. Every time I got whipped, I deserved it. It's a good way to keep in order; I mean that's the way you keep discipline. You have, you know, corporal punishment; you have; it's your fear more than you do a detention. Because a detention is nothing. I mean you stay after class working on your homework; I mean it's nothing. But I swear if you get swapped, it hurts and it makes you not want to do anything; and then one it's the swats you feel. Then it's the, you feel, I'm not going to say less of a person, but you feel the person that's giving you the swats knows how good of a person you are. It makes you feel bad that you let them down, that you are where they have to spank your butt!

Parent *Janie Castleberry* said she never saw anything negative about her daughters going to Pinewoods schools. When asked about the corporal punishment or discipline policies she replied, "If my daughters ever needed to be disciplined that was fine with me." This was the same type response I received from the other two parents, *Mabel Morris* and *La Wanda Baker*, when I asked them about the school's discipline procedures. All of the teachers with whom I talked were extremely supportive of the school's discipline policies. In fact, they told me it was one of the main reasons for teaching at Pinewoods. *Kelsey Smith* stated that the discipline policy was as strong as it was when she began teaching there 22 years ago and it is one of the reasons the students were so good.

Teacher *Corey Callahan* discussed the discipline differently as he stated,

I can say I've had my paddle for two years....and I have not picked it up. They don't have to be paddled. These kids know, um, they know how to act because they were taught how to act from their parents and they come here and they know how to act. They know how to sit in a classroom and....and you know I've had very few, I may have had five discipline problems a year out of my class.

Student *Amanda Holbrook*, regarding the good kids at Pinewoods said,

I think everybody thinks that we're a good school. We have a bunch of good kids. If you act out in the classroom, you go to the office and you know Pinewoods has a corporal punishment so that makes us, you know not act out. I really don't think the O.C.S. (Pinewoods code for In School Suspension) scares anybody because there's not a big deal going to sit in a little box a day. Really, it's like a break because they don't worry about going to class; it's like a free day.

*Jeff Garner*, a junior, felt the discipline policy was fair and accurate, which kept the discipline problems to a minimum. He said in a nearby school he visited and had friends they had a stricter policy, but no corporal punishment. *Jeff* stated they had more problems because no one was "scared to get into trouble."

*Ann Colmes* addressed concerns regarding the discipline problems of the campus as those "kids new that move in or kids that I guess we could call at risk. You know, the kids that are not learning, that can't learn, and they don't want to."

Regarding the discipline procedures of the school, Principal *Alfred Connor* had this to say about Pinewoods discipline problems or rather lack of problems,

Well, I think probably again, this many years ago, probably like any other place, it's the same percentage of folks who cause the problems, whether that's a child, a parent, a teacher, you know, it's the same people usually. So yeah, percentage wise we do have our discipline issues. This year has been extremely mild. My assistant principal has made several comments this year. My response to that is we've been working for years to get it that way. I sure don't mean to pat myself on the back because Pinewoods has always had strong discipline; it's just something that anyone who comes in as an assistant principal or principal needs to get accustomed to. I think tweak it a little bit at that and go along with the teachers. Our teachers are actually allowed to administer any form of discipline that they want as far as corporal punishment, I guess I should say that. They're allowed to administer corporal punishment, if they want. When they send a student to us, they're ours now. They'll be upset if we don't do what you want; we're going to do something. I can honestly say that we're going to be fair. If a senior boy comes in here for chewing gum, and he gets corporal punishment, then

that's what a seventh grade girl is going to get if she comes in here for chewing gum.

The community support surrounding the school does not just encompass the athletic events; the support is overall and in every aspect of the Pinewoods ISD, including their discipline policy. One individual told me that if outsiders move in and begin to cause trouble in the school or have problems with the discipline management of the school, they eventually leave as illustrated based on past lawsuits against the district regarding the corporal punishment policy by "move-ins." No one wanted to outright say troublemakers would be "run out of town," but the innuendo was ever present.

#### *Dedicated Teachers*

When asked to define the "quality" of the school (Figure 11), the majority of the participants replied it was the teachers. The teachers play an important role in the make-up of Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School and are well recognized by the students and members of the community. It is expected the teachers themselves would respond; however, their response was based on other qualities apparent in the district and great teachers though ever present was on the back burner in order to focus on student needs, academics, and extracurricular activities. The teachers were very humble when discussing the qualities of the school. While they felt a part of the successes, they were quick to respond that it was a team effort and every stakeholder including students, community members, faculty, and administration all contributed to the school effort.

However, regarding teaming or faculty collaboration, *Ann Colmes* stated:

Oh, like do I collaborate with the other history teachers? No, but most of the history teachers are coaches. I would say the English department may collaborate to a certain extent, but you'd have to ask somebody else about that.

When asked if she was concerned about the passing rate of the TAKS test, teacher *Kelsey Smith* replied:

Am I concerned about it? No, I'm not concerned about it. I have every confidence in our teachers here that are responsible, that are directly responsible that they will do their job and teachers that are not directly responsible, I have every confidence in us to make sure that we support the teachers who are directly responsible such as going over different math skills, grammar skills in our classroom to reinforce what their teachers are, what the other teachers are teaching these kids.

*Alfred Connor* did not hesitate when asked about the best quality of the school.

He said,

Well, I think the best quality of this school is the teachers. That's just the bottom line. They're definitely dedicated, but they're competitive I think that's the word I like to look at. They have students in the classroom, it's just not a student/teacher relationship at all times. They want them to succeed and do well, and they look upon student success as being successful as a teacher. And they have a hard time accepting mediocrity, and that's been going on before I even got here. And you can see that. They don't accept mediocrity with the students, I mean they really push them.

When asked why the teachers are that way, his response again reverted back to pride:

I don't know that I have an answer to that. I think it's just along the lines of pride. A lot of teachers are from Pinewoods and they see how things have been in the past and it's a small community of course, and they've gone on and got an education. And they consider themselves successful, and they are. But they don't want their success to stop with just an education. Maybe it does go on, almost like an exceptional student athlete and a proud father. They might relive the days through those students, and I think, that's somewhat is what continues to go on with our teachers. I think they're successful. They do things right for Pinewoods through the students.

As for the new teachers, *Mr. Connor* stated there was a difference, but if the new teacher stays longer than three years, the attitude is filtered to him/her. A positive and caring attitude is contagious, since it can influence all who are surrounded by it. If this attitude is not caught, the new teacher will move after one or two years. This brief summary regarding new teachers coming to Pinewoods was the general idea provided by all the participants without hesitation and with a great deal of pride.

Superintendent *Jackson Taylor* emphasized the best quality without a doubt was,

Our staff; let's start with that. It's just kind of been a known thing that we have high expectations for our students, and it's just something that kind of through the years, we like to think of ourselves as being the best school in the area. Our students look to that to work continuously and make sure our kids are doing well, and our kids have a lot of pride in what they do. We do have a low turnover rate. If we can get them there, we feel like if we can keep them, that might have a lot to do with the expectations of the community and the school board.

Student *Brenda Jones* said,

The best quality of this school would have to be the teachers because they really care about your education. They want you to succeed and do your best and you can see that they want you to do your best and that makes you try harder.

Community member *David Simmons* said,

Well, we have a couple of class A students. The enrollment is not that big. We have really good teachers. And I say that, I mean there's really good teachers everywhere, but we're forced to have teachers that have ties here in the community, and they have come back here and they want to live here and we don't have a lot of money to really go out and pay a lot of teachers. And we have been fortunate because we have quality teachers that have come back to teach here.

*Mr. Simmons* briefly referred to the teacher salaries that are extremely low, especially by today's standards. Unfortunately, Pinewoods ISD only pays their teachers state base, which puts them in a non-competitive position for the best teachers in the

state. However, it does put them in a position of getting teachers who want to be there, which seems to be one reason the teachers are so good and so dedicated. Pinewoods ISD does not pay their teachers for coordinating extracurricular activities, such as sponsoring a club/organization or coaching a UIL literary event. Yet, they have no problems getting teachers to sponsor or coach extracurricular activities, which are successful as their state a record in UIL Academics illustrates with several state champions in Spelling and Accounting over the last ten years.

Student *Jeff Garner* insisted the best quality of the school was the teachers. He said,

We've got good teachers; they know what they're doing. I love how the teachers help me out a little extra. They'll give a little more extra work. They make you earn the grade. Well, last year I didn't really care about graduating until I started thinking about college and stuff. This year I am looking at all my grades and getting ready for college. Actually, I failed two classes last year. I failed English I and Algebra I, and I had to be retaking them again this year; so I am more determined now. As for last year, I never paid attention; I was always in the principal's office.

When asked if he saw a difference in his relationship with the teachers, he replied,

Yes ma'am. I get along with my teachers better and I am actually paying attention in class. They know I am trying, but last year, I didn't get along with my teachers.

Student *Jason Wayne Hudson* said about his teachers, "I think the teachers are showing the students what they need to know. The teachers here are respectful to the students."

Student *Kimberly Tyler* also credited her teachers, "Our teachers are always trying to teach us real good. They do everything they can to let us know and make sure we're prepared for the TAKS test."

Community member and Pinewoods alumnus *Laura Kyle* commented on the best quality of the school by stating,

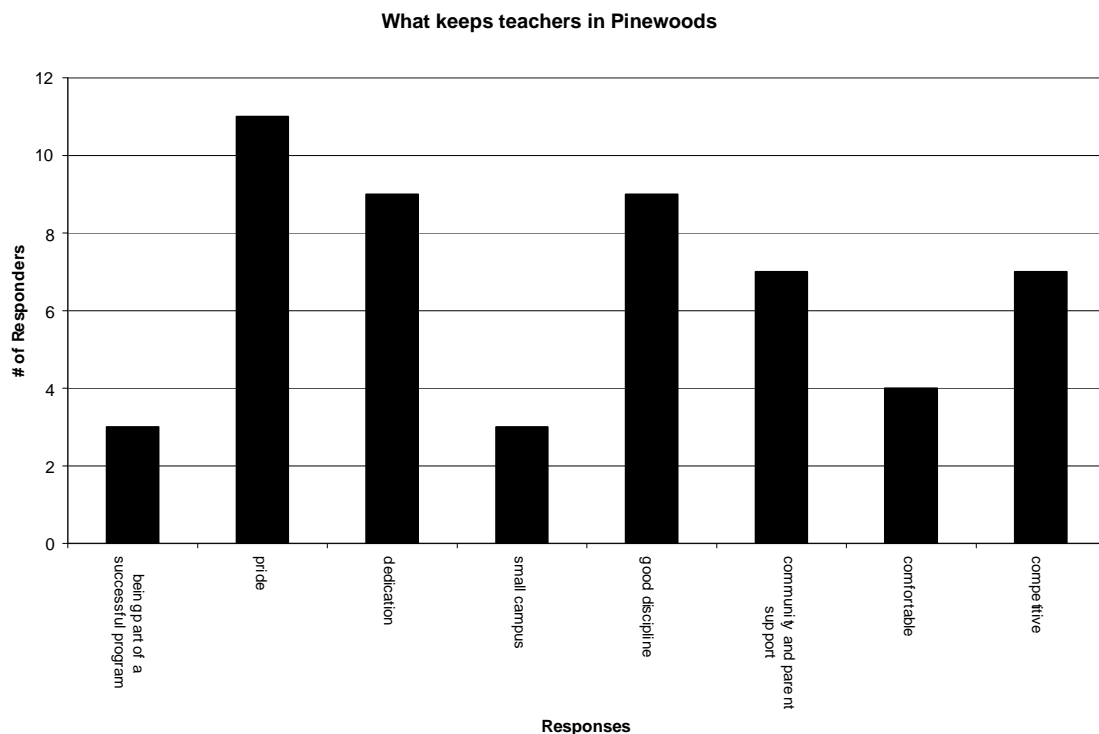
Good teachers. And somehow, I think we've always managed to have good teachers, even though we didn't pay extra. I do not know if it's because they were expected to be good teachers or whether they were just good teachers and got the results out of it. You know I have really pondered why teachers stay here because they come from other schools and it's so different. This is so much more comfortable teaching than it is and they would name their district. And so, I really don't know what to answer there, except that it is just expected. Teachers come in expecting this to be a pleasant experience. And, I think that may be one of the reasons that we've always had good teachers, because they know they're going to have the cooperation of the school and the cooperation from the parents and the entire community. And teachers are respected here at Pinewoods. I've gone to school here myself. I came back. I graduated in 1939 and came back teaching in 1942. I was 20 years old.

When asked about the best quality of the school, the participants focused on the teachers leading to discussions regarding the competitive nature of the school. They viewed that as a good quality because it evolved from dedication, high expectations, and an attitude of "we have to be the best there is in all aspects of education." When discussing the teachers as the best quality of the school, *Alfred Connor, Jackson Taylor, Kelsey Smith, David Simmons, and Corey Callahan* all remarked about the teachers' competitiveness. They were not competitive with each other, but as a whole. Teacher *Corey Callahan* said,

We have great UIL here. None of the UIL teachers get paid, while most schools do. But, it's competition between us because we know what our kids can do and make sure that they do it. We have regular kids and we have some special ed kids that are in the UIL academics.

As illustrated in Figure 12, the teachers stated the reasons they continue to live and work in Pinewoods is because of the pride, dedication, and good discipline, which

encompasses the district. The teacher participants, along with the student participants, mentioned Pinewoods was a successful school because it is a small campus with strong community support and it was a comfortable school to attend. The participants take pride in the fact they consider themselves as a strong competitor in academics and athletics which is evident is the high expectations set by the community, school faculty, and the student body.



*Figure 12.* The reasons teachers continue to teach in Pinewoods.

### *High Expectations in Extracurricular Activities*

Overall, the entire school has to excel in academics, athletics, and personal integrity. This is the one thing that is apparent when an outsider walks into the school for



the very first time. Pinewoods ISD does not have a large tax base, they do not pay well, and the facilities are old. However, none of that seems to really matter to the faculty and students. What matters to them is they are dedicated responsible citizens working toward a common goal: education.

The extracurricular activities from academics to athletics are a big source of quality and pride for this school. There is a sign at the city limits of Pinewoods announcing their three state football titles and the numerous years in which they have participated in the state football playoffs, since Pinewoods is known for their strong football teams. Football was very prominent in all of the conversations, though some people felt it was given too much credit. UIL academics is also strong, along with the school's agricultural programs (Future Farmers of America, FFA). Teachers *Kelsey Smith*, *Ann Colmes*, and *Mary Alice Lawson* want more emphasis and support directed to academics, where it is equal to the athletic programs. They expressed a desire for equal practice time without sports taking precedence over the students. One crippling factor regarding small schools is that the same students participate in everything, which at times causes a small rift between athletic coaches and academic coaches. This situation was observed in Pinewoods and right now there is a need for a compromise before the students are put in the middle of having to choose between competing in academics and athletics. Teacher *Kelsey Smith* said regarding academic contests, "I personally would like a strong support for the academic contests" referring to support from the administration – support in the way of "more consideration time." She said, "We have like one day after school that is designated, but that didn't start till after football season.

Not having to feel like you have to battle for something extra when you advanced to the highest stage, such as State competition.”

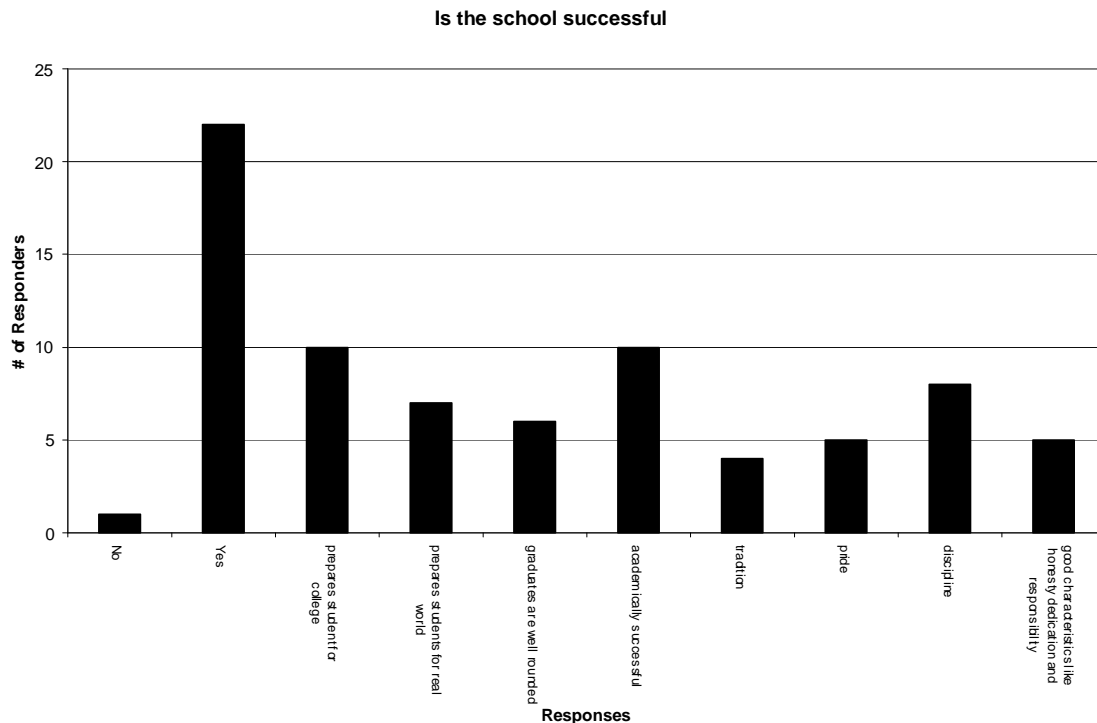
Teacher *Ann Colmes* added to the concerns expressed by *Kelsey Smith* by stating, “I would say that our academic programs are real good, our Ag program is really good, and our athletics is good. I just get tired of athletics.”

### *Pinewoods as a Successful School*

What makes a quality school depends on how the stakeholders feel regarding the success of their school. This was a key question that was asked at different times during all the interviews. When discussing the best quality of Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School, success would invariably enter into the participants’ answers. While the responses varied in what constitutes success at Pinewoods, the replies were basically “Yes! Pinewoods is a successful school” (Figure 13).

*James* and *Tricia* both felt Pinewoods was successful because as *Tricia* explained, “The way I see Pinewoods as successful is preparing students for college or preparing students to have enough education to make it in the real world.” *James* added to this statement by saying,

I see it’s successful because just about every student who graduates, graduates with you know of course they had enough credits to graduate. They’re well rounded, and they were involved in some type of activity. They’re not just bookworms that study all the time. They’re more rounded in activity; more rounded people. They’re able to you know, they can go out and you know meet new people and it’s just more than academically successful is.



*Figure 13.* Is the school successful?

Parent *Mabel Morris* said,

For the most part yes, I would say yes that Pinewoods is successful. It is overall. I guess with four girls and three of them coming out real good, I guess I just thought they dropped the ball on the other one with special needs. I think that would be the one area of weakness I would say Pinewoods has. It would be a special need category. And even now, right now, I would've said their guidance counselor in high school, but they have a new one there and the one that they have there now is more geared up and fired up. I think that they probably would do real good.

Teacher *Mary Alice Lawson* felt there were issues on both sides of the success question,

Well, yes and no. I think there's a lot of errors with the school, but it is successful. They are very community oriented; very "I want to be part of everything." I think it's great. I think it's great. It's not something very particular to me. I'm unfortunately a very individual kind of person. I have a lot of different

beliefs. I'm from a bigger city; so, I'm a little more liberal than a lot of people here with some of the beliefs; so it's been interesting. But I would say yes in some aspects than others.

*Mary Alice* could have been referring to Pinewoods TAKS preparation and data disaggregating when she stated there were a lot of errors. When asked if the administration and teachers disaggregate the TAKS scores by ethnicity, gender, and socio economic status, *Alfred Connor*, principal replied:

No, for the analysis, truly not so much. I don't know if that's a fault, but we don't. The only time that we may look at something like that is when we think that there is a language barrier. You know whether it's English proficient students or whatever.

With that in mind, I posed a similar question to superintendent *Jackson Taylor* regarding why African Americans scored lower on math and science than Whites. He stated:

That has always been our area of weakness, the math from African Americans and Mexican American students, and we're working on that. Now, the elementary did do some summer work. They came in one summer and they worked on vertical alignment. This is the first year for the high school. But yes, basically it goes back to our experienced teachers, and our social studies and our ELA and the most part on math, there has been some errors.... Well, I think in '06, you always have to take into consideration the different groups of kids that are taking the test. I think that last year we had a group of students that did not go the accelerated route. They didn't take Algebra 1 as an 8<sup>th</sup> grader and they took it as a freshman, and they took the test as a sophomore. They didn't have a full year of practice. I think that is somewhat of the reason for the scores of this past year. I had to go back and look exactly what might have caused it, but again it could be the group; we did have the same math teachers. It could go back to the group of students or it could be, you know like I said, they might not have the full year geometry, and if they haven't, they're going to suffer when they take the test.

*Kelsey Smith* said regarding the school as being successful,

Do I believe Pinewoods is successful? Oh, most certainly. It has nothing to do with money I can tell you that much. It is because of tradition, pride in school,

discipline, expecting good characteristics, such as honesty, dedication, and responsibility.

Teacher *Ann Colmes* compared the success of the school to what makes it extremely unique in today's education standards by stating,

I would say it's, the, it's a lot of the faculty; it's the community; it's the administration. I think it's everybody; it's the kids! You know we have good kids here. These kids know like, let me give you an example. There's a boy I have who's a junior, who came in from Houston and his parents moved up here because they wanted to get him out of the environment, although they got terrible farms, you know what I mean? They wanted him more structured and it's sort of like he has now forced himself into the mold of Pinewoods. He knows that you're not disrespectful to the teachers. He knows that you have to study; he knows how to behave and he likes it. You know a lot of kids come in and they don't like it at first. They're like, I can't believe that it's so structured and you know their expectations are higher. I mean a lot of the kids come in here and say it's so much harder here. But I think they're glad when they stay and graduate.

There was very little follow up to the "yes" answers to the question, "Is Pinewoods a successful school?" The resounding "yes" that followed it was said with a great deal of confidence and assurance, but with no mention of state or federal accountability standards. I discovered that when residents of this rural community and members of its school discuss success, they mention pride, tradition, dedication, and discipline, just to name a few of the qualities that make this school a success. As long as their students are getting a good high school education, are able to graduate, and transition into the "real world," the stakeholders and participants of Pinewoods, consider Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School to be successful.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the themes that emerged from the analysis of the research. The three developed themes were (a) the rural advantage, (b)

pride and tradition, and (c) the quality of the school. The next chapter provides a summary of the themes of the research study and discusses their relevance to the literature. In addition, Chapter V will place those themes in the context of the findings, conclusions, and suggestions for policy, practice, and future research.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **SUMMARY, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Nearly 50 miles southwest of Pinewoods and home to one of Texas' major universities where many of the Pinewoods graduates attend, a local radio station announced to its listeners the opportunity to recognize their East Texas Heroes during the Spring 2008. The public was asked to call or email the radio station to introduce the person whom, the listener considered, to be an East Texas Hero. Below is a statement made by one of the Pinewoods graduates who, at the time it was broadcast, was a senior Agri-business major at the university.

My heroes are the teachers at Pinewoods High School. They work really hard, and I feel that they do not always get the recognition they deserve. I am currently a senior in college, and I can honestly say that if it was not for my high school teachers I would not be where I am today. They have helped shaped me into who I am and I want them to be recognized for all of their hard work. The Pinewoods High School teachers are my East Texas Heroes. (Johnson, 2008)

Statements like this are characteristic of some students from rural communities in Texas, because they accentuate the ties that bind its citizens to the local school.

Chapter V, the final chapter, highlights the summary and resulting conclusions of this basic interpretive study. The themes that emerged as a result of two guiding questions will be shared. In order to provide meaning to the voices of the 24 informants from the vibrant community of Pinewoods, conclusions, limitations, and implications for future research will also be shared.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative basic interpretive research study was to determine what local stakeholders in a small rural junior/senior high school perceive as a successful school. The research was guided by two questions:

1. What factors determine success as identified by stakeholders in Pinewoods Independent School District?
2. How do stakeholders in Pinewoods Independent School District perceive success in their junior/senior high school?

The main objective of this basic interpretative case study was to interpret the meaning of how the participants make sense of their lives and their worlds (Merriam, 2002). A generalization beyond this case is inappropriate because the results reflect only on this particular district's situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research was chosen because it creates a pathway to share rich, thick descriptions of people and place, which is essential in describing rural education and interpreting the perceptions of the participants (Patton, 1990; Colardarci, 2007). While I was respectful of the participants' realities, it was me who decided how this case study, including that which is necessary for an understanding, was written (Stake, 2005). While it was my obligation and intention to tell Pinewoods own story, ultimately the report is my perception of the stakeholders' perceptions of Pinewoods own story (Stake, 2005).

A purposeful sampling was used to identify and select the 24 individuals to be interviewed. As a result, rich information was obtained for the depth of this study (Patton, 1990). Every attempt was made to interview a diverse population of informants



in order to obtain an overall perception to effectively “tell their story,” an important tenet of case study research. Of the 24 participants, 4 were African American, 2 were Hispanic, and 18 were White, with 12 males and 12 females representing the population of Pinewoods. The ages of the participants ranged from 15 to 84 years old.

The data were collected in a variety of ways. Interviews, a focus group, and examination of historical documents constituted the data sources. Through interviews, the participants were able to share their insights regarding their school and community. The majority of the interviews were at least an hour in length. All interviews were audio taped and typed over a three-month period. Field notes and observations were audio taped and transcribed into a written journal. The written journal consisted of all the interviews, field notes, and observations that were analyzed for commonalities and themes. The transcripts were analyzed according to each lead question, and the main response of each participant was highlighted. An Excel spreadsheet was created that contained each of the participants’ responses to the lead questions (Appendix D). The spreadsheet was analyzed for common answers which developed the categories and themes.

Additionally, school district documents were studied and examined. They included the AEIS report showing the scores of the district, newspaper articles, and the district’s Internet web page. All the documents were analyzed and questions were prepared for inclusion during the interviews. Member checks were conducted after the interviews and clarifications from the participants were documented.

*Research Question Number 1*

What factors determine success as identified by stakeholders in Pinewoods Independent School District?

Through the analysis of the data from the interviews, a focus group, documents, transcriptions, and audio tapes, three major themes emerged: the rural advantage, pride and tradition, and the quality of the school, Pinewoods style. The rural advantage consisted of three sub-themes: (a) community safe and supportive of its citizens, (b) a community without racial tension, and (c) a nurturing community. Pride and tradition revealed two sub-themes: (a) high expectations and competitive nature of school and (b) school pride. The final theme centered around the quality of the school, Pinewoods style and was made up of four sub-themes: (a) good discipline in school, (b) dedicated teachers, (c) high expectations in academic and extracurricular activities, and (d) Pinewoods as a successful school. In the next section, the themes and the research will be reviewed, which will be aligned to the existing literature regarding rural education and rural communities.

Though the perceptions of the stakeholders regard Pinewoods as successful, there are contradictions which say the opposite:

I feel like there's enough of the teachers that are just like the community, just like the school, and I feel there's some students that are being left out of that. I think that the students who excel at school, who have pride in being here, that want to learn, do great. This is all obviously not with every teacher, and just what I've seen from how some of the things are worded or how some of the way things are done, some of the students are just being pushed through so that they can say they have an education. But I think they are capable of so much more.

*Research Question Number 2*

How do stakeholders in Pinewoods Independent School District perceive success in their junior/senior high school?

Rural citizens take pride in the small town whose vibrancy is centered on the school and its successes. Pinewoods success was consistently associated with academic achievement, school commitment, school involvement, school athletics, and school climate (Jimerson, 2006; Smithmier, 1994; Stewart, 2007). All 24 participants interviewed were enthusiastic when discussing the success of Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School. A resounding “Yes!” was echoed when posed with the question, “Is Pinewoods successful?” Most of the reasons for their perception of the success evolved around academic and college preparation. However, some of the responses included school tradition and the pride felt by those who attended or worked at Pinewoods. Also included in the success category were the quality of the school, its student body, faculty, and the community in general. In fact, the quality of the school, Pinewoods style, highlighted the power in their perceptions of success. No matter what accountability rating the state assigned, they perceived their school as successful. However, two participants felt that to consider Pinewoods successful was twofold. “I think there’s a lot of errors with the school...but I would say yes (Pinewoods is successful) in some aspects than others” stated one of the teacher participants. Along that same aspect, a parent stated:

For the most part yes, I would say yes that Pinewoods is successful. It is overall. I guess I just thought they dropped the ball on the other one (fourth daughter) with special needs. I think that would be one area of weakness I would say Pinewoods has.

### **Rural Advantage**

The ethnic and age make up of the 24 participants comprised a culturally diverse group of individuals. I thought this would provide for a more complete description of Pinewoods while offering different perspectives regarding the activity and functions of this community and school. However, instead of getting 24 completely different opinions and views of Pinewoods and its school, there was a consensus across the various groups of participants describing the advantages of living, working, and being educated in this rural community. This came as a surprise to me as I interviewed each individual separately without sharing information with any of the participants. The general consensus centered on the thoughts and ideas of a rural community as encompassed with high morals, positive attitudes, and disciplined principles that often illustrate the unique aspect of citizenry in a rural community. My informants believed that living in a rural community was to their advantage. They felt they lived in a safe, racially cohesive, and nurturing community.

On the other hand, those individuals who disagreed with the school system or the community in general chose to no longer reside in Pinewoods. While it was never outright stated, it was implied that those individuals or families were asked to move from the community. This may be interpreted that quite possibly the rural advantage may not benefit everyone or everyone may not benefit from the rural advantage particularly, if they hold different values of the rural community in which they live.

*Community as Safe and Supportive of Its Citizens*

Small rural communities are centered around the family, the church, and the school (Hilty, 1999). “There’s not a bunch of problems other than like speeding and all that stuff. It’s actually kind of peaceful” said student *Jose Villamil*, when asked what he liked about the Pinewoods community. Living in a large urban community for over 20 years, I am no longer accustomed to the smallness and peacefulness that Pinewoods provides. I live in a community where most people do not know their next door neighbors; therefore, they are not comfortable enough to leave their homes unlocked when they are away. However, Pinewoods is a community where almost every citizen knows everyone else, maybe not on a personal level, but at the very least as an acquaintance. There is very little crime that occurs in Pinewoods; therefore, it is perceived to be the type of town where a person feels safe when walking down the street. It is a quiet community where going to school or attending school activities is the desired highlight of most of its citizens.

Rural communities are characteristically places that result in close interpersonal associations where individuals know, share, and care for each other (Jimerson, 2006). Teacher *Sandy Harper* stated, “it’s a small community, so you really get to know the families that you’re working with and their backgrounds.” Pinewoods alumni *James Rushing* praised the community because it is small and unique. He said, “I found that going to school in a small town, you’re able to co-act, to co-interact with everybody. You know everybody basically grows up with everybody.”

Rural citizens value place, community and family, in addition to traditional values such as hard work, discipline, and relationships (Long, Bush, & Theobald, 2003). Teacher *Kelsey Smith* described Pinewoods as a laid back agricultural community with good morals and an expectation of proper behavior by its children. The idea is that the little farms are the “good way to raise your kids without getting them involved in drugs and all the gangs and the bad habits,” said *Sandy*. When reflecting on the students attending Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School who live in the lake area (a location where new residents to Pinewoods often live), who move into the community, or perhaps are from troubled backgrounds, *Sandy* said, “I just hope that our good old boy values will override those other influences they get.” *Ann Colmes* also stated, “The main discipline problems we have here, I don’t know if I should say this, that’s across the board, but it tends to be new kids who move in or kids that I guess we could call at risk. You know the kids that are not learning, that can’t learn, and they don’t want to.” The informants’ responses illustrated what was mentioned in Theobald (1991) that the rural belief, along with its values, embraces a moral ideal that encompasses character, community, and the environment.

However, the teachers’ statements indicate they are willing victims of deficit thinking (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). This exemplifies the idea that students and families who move into Pinewoods or who are labeled at risk compose the bulk of the school’s discipline problems and are, in general, marked as such. Therefore, it was perceived that they may somehow lower the quality of education expected of Pinewoods’ students. This convenient excuse fits in the realm of deficit thinking as defined by Skrla and Scheurich

(2001) because the description of the discipline problems was defined by the teachers and explained as deficient within the school setting. In other words, the problem as defined by the teachers, is not the school; it is where the children were originally raised before they entered Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School (Skrla & Scheruich, 2001).

Generally, rural communities correspond to more traditions or conservative values (Nachtigal, 1992). Retired teacher and active member of the community, *Laura Kyle* stressed the importance of the community's cohesive bond among its citizens through its respect. She believed this led to a pride for where one has come from and how one has contributed to society. She mentioned the support of the community covers all boundaries of society and school, which is illustrated, as she proudly noted, through the war memorials placed around the flag pole in the high school yard in memory of Pinewoods graduates who died in each of America's wars up to the Vietnam Conflict. The rural school is the focal point of the community's pride and the center of rural society with corresponding social events; it is where the community provides financial, volunteer, and moral support in return (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

The pride in the rural school is often much greater and taken more seriously, thereby creating a bond between the community and the school, which is a common characteristic of small rural schools (Barley & Beesley, 2007). School pride is seen throughout the community as Pinewoods citizens appear to be involved in the school by attending athletic events and fundraisers for various school organizations. It is well known that in the fall season on Friday nights, almost the entire community is at the

football stadium cheering for their Indians; and when Pinewoods scores a touchdown, the roar of the crowd is so loud it can be heard from one end of the town to the other.

As a whole, the school is supported by the community. School board member *David Simmons* elaborated on this support as it related to the school. He said that the support is not just for the students; the community trusts the school's board and administration illustrated through the longevity of service held by each member of the school board along with every superintendent who has worked for Pinewoods ISD. There has never really been too much controversy surrounding the Pinewoods school board where the demographics consist of seven White men; several participants implied that the lack of politics in relation to the town's education was little to none. The bond of trust between the community and the school board, as mentioned by *David and Jackson Taylor*, is strong giving the district strength not found in very many communities across the state (Alsbury, 2003; Hess, 2002).

On the other hand as stated by *Kelsey Smith, David Simmons*, and *Jackson Taylor*, neither the school board nor the school administration have ever been diversified. There has never been a person of color nor has there been a female serve on the school board or a principal of Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School. The faculty of the school is predominately White, which is something that *Willis Johnson* felt needed improvement. *Willis* proposed that, "We would see a difference in our young black male's attitudes and academics if more positive black adults were around." This is in effect equivalent to that in which Steele (2003) referred to as stereotype threat or the feeling of inferiority due to one's ethnicity, gender, or socio economic status.



The close cooperation and communication between teachers and parents, while providing the basic curriculum that is understood and goal directed, and a small town population, which values the school, illustrates some of the examples of the rural advantage (Chalker, 1999). The connection between the school and community appeared strong, positive and supportive of both entities. The support provided by the community enhanced the school's perceptions of success. There is no doubt the school is an essential component of the rural community where it identifies with the school because of the many generations of the community's population that attended the school (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

"I guess we are satisfied" quipped *Willis* as he mentioned that change would be good for the community of Pinewoods. However, as research has shown, in order for Pinewoods to improve, the stakeholders have to admit there is a problem and be willing to change (Haller et al., 1999).

#### *Lack of Racial Tension in Community*

"Race is always an issue to a certain extent" stated teacher *Ann Colmes* (White) and though it is synonymous of the Deep South as evidenced in recent incidents making national headlines regarding racial tension (Mangold, 2007; Neal, 2005; Witt, 2008), Pinewoods appears to have few if any problems based on the color of a person's skin. While my informants perceived few race issues in Pinewoods, there are still eyebrows raised at the idea of interracial relationships. *Ann* admitted to being bothered with those who seem to judge others who might be bi-racial. Her discernment was not held back when she said she had been upset at a recent teacher's lounge gossip regarding Whites

who date African Americans, illustrating the lack of acceptance regarding interracial relationships. However, my informants did not feel that the community was guided by racial tension. In fact, they felt that the community interacted well together, especially around issues related to school and school activities.

Community member and the mother of two Pinewoods graduates, *Janie Castleberry* (White) surmised that the lack of race issues in the community was because “they are all taught that we’re all equal and to always treat a person like they treat you.” Though Pinewoods is perceived as strong on moral and community values, race issues have been observed in this town. Some things have indeed occurred though not inherently obvious because *Ann* referred to a grandfather of an African American high school student. He had written letters to the newspaper angry that his granddaughter had been mistreated at school because she was African American. She stated that only a few letters were printed, but in her belief nothing had come of them. This raised a question as to whether there was indeed a situation occurring with the administration ignoring the issue or the grandparent was exaggerating the situation. Either way, there appeared to be an undercurrent of some racial tension in the community.

The beliefs in which Pinewoods may value are passed down from parents to children and seem unwavering when it comes to affairs of the conscious. However, with incidents like those mentioned above, one has to wonder if there are real race issues in this community and whether they are being addressed. If there were problems, none of the participants were willing to openly discuss the issues or they just chose not to be

aware of them. Nonetheless, they all appeared to be satisfied with the societal situation even though ethnic harmony has yet to be completely fulfilled.

Four years prior to this study, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) requested permission to hold a rally in downtown Pinewoods. Word spread quickly among the community that in order to protect the citizens, no one must go to the rally to give emphasis to the KKK and what they stand for regarding White supremacy. *Laura Kyle* said the community saw it “as a negative” and no one showed up. However, parent *La Wanda Baker* (African American) said she took her sons to teach them that while everyone is different, people are generally all the same. She told her children that the men with the white hoods were cowards and weak and that “we are all the same no matter color, race, or gender.” It is important to note that because of the unsuccessful rally held on that day, the KKK has never requested another rally nor have they returned to Pinewoods.

Generally speaking, the KKK will have a rally in a community after an invitation by a Klan member from said community (Chapman, 2006). If all was racially cohesive in Pinewoods, why then would the KKK even attempt to host a rally? Again, there is an appearance of racial cohesion while the heart of the matter may tell a different story.

*Willis Johnson* expressed a desire for a more diversified school board and administration. However, the underlying truth may be that Pinewoods citizens are more racially divided than they are willing to admit. In June 2008, *Willis* was appointed by the Pinecone County Judge to fill a vacancy on the County Commissioners Court as a result of the resignation of the previous commissioner. With the appointment, *Willis* became the first African American to hold a seat on the Pinecone County Commissioners Court.

The judge stated he wanted someone with knowledge of the county and county government and who was also educated (*Trinity Standard*, 2008). *Willis* accepted the appointment and announced he would seek the Democratic Party's nomination for that seat in the November 2008 election. However, in July 2008, the Democratic Party of Pinecone County chose a White man who owned a transmission repair shop over *Willis* (*Groveton News*, 2008). *Willis'* name was never even entered on the ballot. He only completed the term of the previous commissioner who resigned. An appearance of racial bias and subsequent discrimination exists in this example.

As *Mr. & Mrs. Kyle* (a White couple) shared with me regarding race relations, Pinewoods de-segregated the public school about two to three years before it became mandatory by the federal government without criticism from anyone in the community. Although it appears to not be a negative by the residents of Pinewoods, the neighborhoods (over 30 years later) are still segregated. While the neighborhoods are still segregated, it was not perceived as a negative by my informants. *Mrs. Kyle* stated, "they live over in their area and we have not integrated very much in their housing, but there are some who are right up close in town who live in houses. I think the churches are by there and they like to be together." Therefore, the perception is that the segregated neighborhoods are not due to the unwillingness of one ethnic group to accept the other. Rather, it is a geographic issue based on available housing to be near one's church and congregational family.

Although he lived in the country, *Willis Johnson's* (African American) next door neighbors were White. When he was asked whether there had ever been racial tension in

the community or school, he responded, “Race relations? I don’t see that as a problem here and believe me, if it was, I think I would know.” Overall, the perceptions of the informants regarding race issues were that Pinewoods was a caring community that cares for its citizens. However, as previously suggested, the appearance of a racially cohesive community may be superficial.

### *A Nurturing Community*

“They take care of their own” was consistently stated throughout this chapter and I used it interchangeably to describe what makes this community and its citizens think they are unique and extremely special in the grand scheme of things. Peaceful, small, quiet, caring, respectful, and wholesome are but a few of the adjectives used to describe the community of Pinewoods. The general feeling one gets when visiting Pinewoods is that each citizen is important and worth helping, fighting for, or saving. Although the community appears to nurture her citizens, expect respect, and distribute discipline when necessary in order to teach the values and morals to its children, not every citizen was interviewed for this study. Therefore, the perception is, at best, broad.

There are many reasons for the unchanging atmosphere of Pinewoods, all of which center on the traditions passed from one generation to the next and the contentment the citizens express when in conversation about what makes Pinewoods great. But there seems to be a sense of denial from the participants as to what could be the actual persona of the community. As always, my informants reflected on how the community takes care of her children: it’s a “pride thang!” was a common response from *Corey Callahan*, *Kelsey Smith*, and *James Rushing* regarding the Pinewoods community,

school, and traditions. Yet, the data from this study has shown there are (a) evidence of deficit thinking among the teachers, (b) some significant race issues present, and (c) little to no diversity in the school or community administrative staffs.

### **Pride and Tradition**

The “Pride of the Tribe” is revealed every time the Indians of Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School step on the playing field whether it is football, volleyball, academics, or as they enter into the classroom. In general, rural citizens take pride in their schools, often referring to the school as a family feeling where there is individual attention and the community commits its resources and people for the betterment of the school (McCracken & Miller, 1988).

The citizens of Pinewoods are proud of their community, their school, and their citizens as evident of the billboards and signs located throughout the town proudly displaying the accomplishments of the football team. The start of a new school year has always meant the businesses in the community will show their pride and support to the school by writing “Go Indians” or “All the way to State, Indians” on their windows. As one person told me, “It’s tradition!”

Principal *Alfred Connor* stated that pride is encompassed throughout the entire community. This pride affects his faculty, who in turn influences the students. Competition is viewed as a positive that is related to hard work and dedication, which then leads to success. High expectations are a tradition within this school and community as *Mr. Connor* stated, “They want students to do well and be kind of competitive. And

they are supportive because they want student success.” Yet, this research wonders if this success is intended for all Pinewoods students.

*High Expectations and Competitive Nature*

“We have high expectations for our students, and it is just something that kind of through the years, we like to think of ourselves as being the best school in the area” said Superintendent *Jackson Taylor*. Student *Maria Moreno* stated that because of the school’s high expectations she has advanced tremendously in her academics. “I think its (Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School) academic level, it’s really good because the standard of it is really high and the teachers expect a lot from everyone and not just one person, and that’s what I think is most important.”

High expectations are evident among everyone as I was fortunate to have observed student and teacher behavior in the halls between class periods and in the classrooms during instruction. Since I am an administrator for a large urban high school, I am all too familiar with having to make students go to class whether it is between classes or during the class period. Unfortunately, while I am in the hallways encouraging students to get to class, I hear a great amount of disrespect, not only among our students, but directed towards faculty and staff as well.

While I was visiting the school in Pinewoods, I felt as though I were in the “Twilight Zone” as I observed students going to class on time, teachers greeting students at their classroom doors with genuine care, “Hello, how are you” and “Howdy, how were your holidays?” I heard students talking among themselves in a friendly manner and then to adults as they addressed them with “Yes ma’am” or “No sir” illustrating the

expectations of proper behavior. Then, much to my amazement, before the tardy bell rang for the next class, the hall was clear of students. This anomaly of students getting to class on time was something I had never witnessed before and quite frankly, I felt like I was in uncharted waters!

Pinewoods is well known in the East Texas area as being a “football town” because they have had success in their football program. In addition, the community support for the football team is also well known and admired throughout the area. The community boasts of the school’s three state football titles and many years of winning to get in the football playoffs though they have not always won the state title.

Board member *David Simmons* contributed the high expectation and competitive nature of the school to the success of the athletic programs that has affected the competitiveness of the faculty who want their students to succeed academically. “These teachers have taken upon themselves to allow their students to be known for their literary and scholarly events and not just athletics. I think that through the years, the teachers have taken a real sense of pride with it.” *Mr. Simmons* stressed that the tradition of the school’s competitiveness is generated from the expectations of the administration and community. To be the best is just “expected” and, as he stated, “I think it’s just the pride in the school and the teachers getting paid to do the job. You’re doing it because you love to do it and it gives you a sense of achievement. I am really proud to say that I think that the school still has that.” Adding to this sentiment, teacher *Kelsey Smith* stated, I continue to stay here because of the pride that this school has.... It has nothing to do with money, I can tell you that much. It is because of tradition, pride in school, discipline,



expecting good characteristics, honesty, dedication, and responsibility.” School educators enjoy the social life and pride in the small town which centers on the school and its successes (Jimerson, 2006; Smithmier, 1994).

Upon further examination of the transcripts and supporting documents, several themes became inherently obvious regarding the issue of high expectations of the school. First of all in relation to the TAKS assessments, *Alfred Connor* admitted that Pinewoods does not analyze their scores or disaggregate them by ethnicity, gender, socio economic status or special populations in general. He stated, “the only time that we may look at something like that is when we think that there is a language barrier.” In addition, *Kelsey* stated her concern for the TAKS was limited,

Am I concerned about it? No, I’m not concerned about it. I have every confidence in our teachers here that are directly responsible that they will do their job and teachers that are not directly responsible, I have every confidence in us to make sure that we support the teachers who are directly responsible such as going over different math skills, grammar skills in our classroom to reinforce what their teachers are teaching.

However, the AEIS school report card affects all faculty, therefore, all teachers are directly responsible. *Kelsey’s* “not my job” attitude may have an impact on Pinewoods’ TAKS scores, particularly if she is not the only elective teacher who has similar feelings. Pinewoods Jr./Sr High School was Recognized in 2005-2006 but dropped to Academically Acceptable in 2006-2007.

From the teachers’ conversations, the perception of high expectations may be just an appearance. When asked about department team planning, most of the teacher participants said such planning did not exist. “Oh, do I collaborate with the other history

teachers? No, but most of the history teachers are coaches.” This statement reflected that accountability may only be for an elite few. As a whole, the teachers appear to not be concerned about the scores, students, or in general about the school’s academic standing with the state, though they stated otherwise. This raised the question for whom the high expectations were meant. *Alfred Connor* conferred that up until 2008, Pinewoods never had a set curriculum, nor did they have any type of vertical alignment for the curriculum. When he purchased a curriculum from their region service center, the teachers fought him regarding its use in their classrooms. At the end of the school year, it was noted the teachers were informed they could use the purchased curriculum on a voluntary basis. Most of the teacher participants said they had stopped using the curriculum because their way of teaching was more efficient.

### *School Pride*

Teacher *Corey Callahan*, stated school pride was expected and that had never changed in Pinewoods. He said it was that way when he graduated from Pinewoods and because of the competitive nature of the school, it was still that way. For new teachers moving to Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School, it is sometimes an adjustment, particularly for those not accustomed to rural schools. *Corey* stated, “We try to make sure that they (new teachers) understand that ‘Hey this is a pride thing.’ Whether it is pride in athletics or pride in academics, when a person puts on that Pinewoods shirt or jacket, that means something.”

New teacher *Mary Alice Lawson* did not share the enthusiasm regarding school pride and tradition. She stated, “I am not like that. That’s where I kind of feel like an

outsider. I am into the students, not the school, and that may be a bad thing and part of my inexperience. But I feel like I'm more about students and not the school." However, *Mary Alice* was virtually alone in this thought, her insights are important to note because she said she felt like an outsider. New teachers to rural communities and schools often find it difficult to embrace the social, cultural, and professional responsibilities, since they often report feelings of isolation (Townsell, 2007).

*Mary Alice* mentioned that if she felt like an outsider, "what about the students who also feel the way I do?" In other words, she said some students were being left out and literally ignored. However, none of the student participants mentioned they felt left out, nor did they mention that any of their friends felt that way either.

*Mary Alice* was from a large urban high school, which was definitely reflective of her perception regarding the community and school of Pinewoods. While I understood what she was saying, I also reflected on the literature reviewed for this study that discusses the urban views and/or opinions of ruralness. They are totally different from those of rural citizens. This is a perfect example of why more rural education research is important. Further, it also supports the importance of more rural education advocates in the state and federal legislatures. *Corey* stated very clearly that if a new teacher does not buy into the rural attitude of Pinewoods, then that teacher usually did not last long as a teacher there. It is evident from talking with *Ms. Lawson* that outsiders do not adjust easily to the Pinewoods way of life. Adding to this notion, *Ann Colmes* said, "A lot of the new young ones (teachers) are not as dedicated. But they don't tend to stay; so they move on."

A genuine feeling of pride was evident in the students as well. Student *Johnny Blake* felt that the spirit and pride were some of the best qualities of the school. He said, “As far as the athletic program, they take big pride in athletic programs. As far as academics, they expect to win big in UIL events.” *Johnny* insisted that it was a pride thing and it was expected.

Pinewoods citizens feel they are academically and athletically successful, because of the expectations of the community, school administration, and faculty. High expectations and school pride are embedded deep into every individual’s conscious as a result of the constant reminders of the competitive nature of not only the school but the community as well. Many rural schools have the same sentiments but not all appear to be as consistent in traditions and pride as Pinewoods. During the course of this study, it became apparent that Pinewoods had many common qualities of other rural areas and schools, but yet had its own unique style. The most common characteristic of rural communities is diversity since there is a large range of communities whose citizens share ruralness, but differ in circumstances. Really, the only commonality among rural communities is that they are all different (Sher, 1981).

The environment is intrinsically apparent anytime one visits the school. Students in rural schools build such skills as strong relationships, communication, cooperation, and negotiation with other students and teachers because individuals know and care for one another (Wright, 2007). Smaller rural schools utilize the close associations surrounded by small facilities and the teachers’ personal connectedness to the community and the school (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

However, there is still the separation of the different groups of individuals who make up the school and community. Some new teachers feel they are outsiders with no help or period of adjustment provided by veteran staff. Some segregation among faculty is obvious as there was no evidence of collaboration or team planning. The school pride motto is a given, but often reflects only on those individuals born and raised in Pinewoods.

### **Quality of School, Pinewoods Style**

All of the 24 participants in the study felt a great deal of ownership in Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School, asserting a deep sense of appreciation for what they have received from the school. The qualities of the school became apparent even before the last of the participant interviews and researcher's observations were completed. McCracken and Miller (1988) found in a study of the perceptions of rural teachers in regards to the quality of their school, that the advantages of teaching in a rural school included fewer discipline problems, a slower pace, lower cost of living, and more freedom in teaching. Many of the common themes under school quality were reflected by (a) good discipline, (b) dedicated teachers, (c) high expectations in academic and extracurricular activities, and (d) school success.

### *Good Discipline in School*

Less than one-third (30%) of the school districts in the United States allow corporal punishment (NCES, 2008) with 35% of those districts located in rural areas particularly the south. Corporal punishment is illegal in 29 states. Texas is one of the 21 states where corporal punishment is legal for school districts as part of their discipline

management policies (NCES, 2008). Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School is one of the schools in Texas with a corporal punishment policy. None of the 24 participants said Pinewoods corporal punishment policy was negative. In fact, all of the participants stated that one of the best qualities of the school was the discipline policy. Pinewoods graduate *James Rushing* explained when he received “pops” or he was “paddled on the butt,” was because he “deserved it.” He stated, “I think paddling is the way to go for the kids, it keeps people more in line. Every time I got whipped, I deserved it. It’s a good way to keep order; I mean that’s the way you keep discipline.”

Student *Jeff Garner* said the discipline policy was fair and accurate, which in his view, kept the discipline problems to a minimum. He said that a school not too far from Pinewoods had a strict discipline policy but without the corporal punishment. Jeff stated there were more discipline problems at the other school because, “no one is scared to get into trouble.” Parents *Janie Castleberry*, *Mabel Morris*, and *La Wanda Baker* were all positive and supportive when asked about the discipline management policy. *Janie* responded to the question of corporal punishment with, “If my daughters ever needed to be disciplined that was fine with me.” In Pinewoods, the perception is strong discipline is the key to raising a child and the school is valued as an entity to administer such discipline.

Pinewoods discipline management is supported throughout the community, but that support has not kept the corporal punishment policy from being scrutinized. In 2006, a federal lawsuit was filed against Pinewoods ISD. The district’s use of corporal punishment was attacked. The U.S. Court upheld the district’s discipline and corporal

punishment policy, while it proclaimed that PISD was not liable in the type of discipline administered to the child named in the lawsuit. The federal court cited law stating, “the paddling of recalcitrant children has long been an accepted method of promoting good behavior and instilling notions of responsibility and decorum into mischievous heads of school children” (“Federal court,” 2006, p. 2).

Research has suggested that children, who are exposed to corporal punishment such as being whipped on the buttocks with a board by an adult, may become physically aggressive toward their siblings, parents, classmates, and teachers (Human Rights Watch, 2008). Although the federal court upheld the school’s use of corporal punishment, the American Academy of Pediatrics believes, “that corporal punishment may affect adversely a student’s self-image and school achievement and that it may contribute to disruptive and violent behavior” (Taras et al., 2000, p. 343).

### *Dedicated Teachers*

Teachers who live in rural communities and teach in small schools tend to be more satisfied with their jobs, thereby resulting in fewer absences, while taking a more proactive approach to student learning (Jimerson, 2006). A popular answer among the participants, when asked about the quality of the school was in regard to the teachers. Student *Brenda Jones* stated, “The best quality of this school would have to be the teachers because they really care about your education.” *Jeff Garner* agreed with *Brenda* when he insisted, “We’ve got good teachers; they know what they’re doing. I love how the teachers help me out a little extra. They make you earn the grade.” He stated the year before he struggled as a student and failed two classes. He admitted to visiting the

principal quite often for being in trouble. However, he said school was different for him as he stated, “I get along with my teachers better and I am actually paying attention in class.” Students’ academic success depends on whether they can establish a sense of connectedness with individuals, the most important being the teachers, in the school environment (Perreault & Hill, 2000).

Long time community member and retired Pinewoods teacher *Laura Kyle* stated, “somehow I think we’ve always managed to have good teachers, even though we didn’t pay extra. I do not know if it’s because they were expected to be good teachers or whether they were just good teachers and got the results out of it.” She said she had wondered what kept good teachers in Pinewoods. Pinewoods is in accordance with research that has noted that teachers state the major advantages to working in rural community schools are parental involvement, friendly, respectful students and staff, and good family environments (Jimerson, 2006; McCracken & Miller, 1988; Smithmier, 1994). These variables are consistently associated with academic achievement, school commitment, school involvement, and school climate (Stewart, 2007).

*Mrs. Kyle* felt good teachers stayed in Pinewoods because the atmosphere is comfortable and teachers expect a pleasant experience. “I think that may be one of the reasons that we’ve always had good teachers, because they know they’re going to have the cooperation of the school and the cooperation from the parents and the entire community. And teachers are respected here at Pinewoods.” *Mrs. Kyle* retired from Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School in 1986 after 43 years of teaching business. She said the attitude of the teachers did not change and the philosophies of the faculty have remained



intact since Pinewoods was built in 1895. For a rural school to excel in academics and extracurricular activities, the foundation for such a success must come from the faculty. Faculties in rural schools have a strong influence on school culture (Howley, 2000).

However, Pinewoods teachers resist change as evident in the fight over the purchased standard curriculum for the core subject classes. The participants said they were satisfied with the quality of teachers employed at Pinewoods, but the teachers fight change, are satisfied with the status quo, and appear to be unconcerned about closing the achievement gap of their students of color. They resist collaboration, modern instructional strategies, and they appear to only be concerned with the students in their class and not with the students as a whole body; therefore, the emphasis on accountability has relatively little effect on the faculty. The philosophy of the Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School teachers, according to the participants, was built upon pride, dedication, discipline, and high expectations in academic and extracurricular activities. As a result of the evidence studied, one may question the quality of the Pinewoods faculty and whether they mean what they said regarding high expectations in academic and extracurricular activities.

#### *High Expectations in Academic and Extracurricular Activities*

Pinewoods has been, since the 2005-2006 school year, academically acceptable as defined by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report (Figure 8). The rating under the current Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test began during the school year 2003-2004 in which Pinewoods was Recognized and again in 2004-2005. However, in 2005-2006 the rating

lowered to academically acceptable even though the scores across all subjects and grade levels actually rose. Upon further review, the AEIS report revealed that the rating was dropped because of the African American scores in math. The same thing occurred in 2007-2008, Pinewoods would have been a recognized campus, but 55% of Pinewoods African American students passed the TAKS math, while 61.9% of them passed in Science. When I discovered the scores for math and science were lower than the Whites, and shared this with superintendent *Jackson Taylor* and principal *Alfred Connor* had little to no response other than they were beginning to concentrate on closing the achievement gap in those two subjects. According to *Jackson Taylor*, “that has always been our area of weakness, is the math, from African Americans and Mexican American students, and we’re working on that.” This appears more reflective of an excuse than as a solution to an obvious achievement gap situation for Pinewoods. He went on to say regarding African American scores in math that, “you always have to take into consideration the different groups of kids that are taking the test. I think that last year we had a group of students that did not go the accelerated route.”

As discussed in Skrla and Scheurich (2001), *Jackson* exemplified what they termed as deficit thinking. His response alluded to “the broad-scale underperformance of children of color and children from low-income homes in their schools as inevitable, something that is not within their power to change” (p. 237).

I interviewed *Willis Johnson*, an African American teacher who had taught science and was currently teaching World Geography. His response to this question centered on what he felt was an issue for African American students. He believed

African American learners did not respond as well to their White teachers. This may be reflective to the theory of stereotype threat as defined in current research regarding academic deficiencies where “the pressure that a person can feel when he/she is at risk of confirming, or being seen to confirm to a negative stereotype about his/her group” (Steele & Davies, 2003, p. 311). Tables 6 and 7 compare the TAKS scores of African American students to the TAKS scores of the White students since the school year 2002-2003 (Texas Education Agency, 2008a). As the tables illustrate, there were significant improvements in the scores from 2003 to 2008. However, there is still an achievement gap between African American students’ scores and those of White students at Pinewoods.

Table 6. TAKS Scores of Pinewoods **African American** Students

Subject	2003	2004	Percentages		2007	2008
			2005	2006		
ELA	33	65	79	91	79	86
Math	24	33	45	32	56	55
Science	8	20	40	71	18	62
Social Studies	5	88	92	99	89	94
All Tests	10	23	45	35	43	*

*Source:* Academic Excellence Indicator System (Texas Education Agency, 2008a).

\*Total scores not posted at time of writing this paper.

Table 7. TAKS Scores of Pinewoods **White** Students

Subject	2003	2004	Percentages		2007	2008
			2005	2006		
ELA	70	89	86	92	91	92
Math	39	59	72	80	78	85
Science	45	51	72	85	75	74
Social Studies	87	92	96	90	94	93
All Tests	31	53	63	73	72	*

*Source:* Academic Excellence Indicator System (Texas Education Agency, 2008a).

\*Total scores not posted at time of writing this paper.

Research has noted that stereotype threat affects academic achievement when an individual feels he/she is not as intelligent because of his/her particular group whether it is related to gender, race, or social status (Perry et al., 2003; Steele & Davies, 2003). Various studies have demonstrated that stereotype threats though psychological, are very powerful and detrimental to a student's academic ability (McGlone & Aronson, 2007; Perry et al., 2003). Some believe this affects this country's wide achievement gap; the threat lingers and affects all ethnic, gender, and economic populations.

When I mentioned the African American scores in math and science were considerably lower than the Whites, *Willis Johnson* stated that he was not aware of any racial tensions among the students, teachers, or teachers to students. He gave no explanation as to the reason the African American scores were lower than the Whites other than he sometimes wondered if, "White teachers think that if they lean on Black kids, they will be labeled a racist or hard on Black kids. They (Black kids) see through it, they see right through it."

Dedicated, supportive, and respectful teachers are important to an environment which promotes positive academic and socio-emotional outcomes (Jimerson, 2006; Stanley et al., 2008). The teachers at Pinewoods expect their students to achieve in the classroom and on the playing field according to the student participants. They mentioned their teachers expected the best from all the students. Student *Jeff Garner* said the teachers “make you earn the grade.” Student *Kimberly Tyler* also gave credit to the teachers when she emphasized, “Our teachers are always trying to teach us real good. They do everything they can to let us know and make sure we’re prepared for the TAKS test.” The students ranged in ability from being in the top 5% of the class to being in the lower half of the class in terms of grade point average. One student interviewed was a special education student, and his responses were the same as the two students who were expected to be the valedictorians of their perspective classes. For the students, the expectations of the teachers meant for all students to “aim high” with dedication, discipline, and they knew they always had the teachers’ support. *Maria Moreno* emphasized, “I think its (Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School) academic level, it’s really good because the standard of it is really high and the teachers expect a lot from everyone and not just one person, and that’s what I think is most important.”

Again, reverting back to African American TAKS scores, the data reveal a different picture of Pinewoods success in comparison to the perceptions of the participants. The teachers are dedicated, but the scope of their intentions appears to be limited and questionable, as evident in the TAKS scores with their individual accountability system as opposed to state accountability as a whole.

*Kelsey Smith, Ann Colmes, and Mary Alice Lawson* stated they want Pinewoods to place more emphasis on academic competitions, not to take away from athletics, but so that it is equal to the athletic programs. “We have like one day that is designated (for UIL practice), but that didn’t start till after football season. Not having to feel like you have to battle for something extra when you advanced to the highest level, such as State competition” argued *Kelsey Smith*. The never ending battle between academics and athletics is counter to what they perceive as high expectations in academic and extracurricular activities. As such, and according to the teacher participants, academics is not held to the same high expectations as athletics through budget and allowed practice schedules. Therefore, high expectation cannot be said to be true for all activities. As a result, high expectations are not held for all students.

In many successful rural schools, the way of life in the community guides its students in the direction of a good education and gives them the experience and knowledge on which to build their futures. Successful rural schools fit the community and they are consistent with the distinctiveness of rural life (Wright, 2007).

#### *Pinewoods as a Successful School*

“Yes! Pinewoods is a successful school” was the response of most of the participants when asked about school success. While it was agreed that Pinewoods was successful, the responses of why varied. Pinewoods alumni *Tricia Rushing* explained, “The way I see Pinewoods as successful is preparing students for college or preparing students to have enough education to make it in the real world.” *James* credited the

school for graduating well-rounded students because, “they were involved in some type of activity. They’re not just bookworms that study all the time.”

*Mabel Morris* (an African American parent) stated, “I would say yes that Pinewoods is successful. It is overall. I guess with four girls and three of them coming out real good.” One of *Mrs. Morris’s* daughters was named head basketball coach in June 2008 at a major university in the south. *Mrs. Morris* was pleased with the education her children received as they graduated from Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School with the exception of her youngest daughter. She was concerned that Pinewoods “dropped the ball on the one with special needs. I think that would be the one area of weakness I would say Pinewoods has.” *Mrs. Morris* had three of her children to graduate from college, but the youngest has a learning disabled. When she graduated from Pinewoods, the counselor at the time referred the *Morris* family to services in a nearby city. After the psychologist, at the center for people with special needs where she was referred, tested *Mrs. Morris’s* daughter, she was advised the daughter could be a dog groomer. Discouraged by the doctor and disappointed that her daughter was not given any help, *Mrs. Morris* stated that she had given up. At the time of the interview, her daughter was living at home unemployed at the age of 21. She did, however, follow that statement by stating as a parent she failed her youngest daughter as well so, as she stated, the school was not totally to blame.

However, if the faculty truly believed that all their students can learn, why then does one parent believe her daughter was left behind? Success should not be limited to those students taking advanced academic courses. According to NCLB, the purpose was

to focus all schools on closing the achievement gap between children of color, socioeconomic status, and children with special needs. The story of *Mabel's* daughter defies the overwhelming response that Pinewoods is successful.

Not only was one child with special needs left behind, so were children of color particularly in math and science. While the stakeholders consider their school successful, in view of state and federal accountability measures they are not. Too many students are being left behind and will continue to be until the Pinewoods stakeholders admit to and identify their challenges.

*Mary Alice Lawson* responded to the question of whether the school was successful as, “yes and no. I think there are a lot of errors with the school but it is successful....I would say yes in some aspects than others.” Teacher *Ann Colmes* compared the success of the school, making it, in her opinion, unique under NCLB accountability standards. She attributed the success to, “the faculty, it’s the community; it’s the administration. I think it’s everybody; it’s the kids! You know we have good kids here.”

When asked if the school was successful, the “yes” that followed was said with confidence and assurance, but with no mention of state or federal accountability standards. When the participants discussed Pinewoods success, they mentioned pride, tradition, dedication, and discipline, just to name a few of the qualities that made this school successful. In essence, if the majority of students in Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School are getting a good high school education, are able to graduate, and transition into



the “real world” of college or work, the community of Pinewoods will continue to be supportive of the school and value it as successful.

Events relevant to rural areas are integrated within the classroom environment. A correlated curriculum is used to support these events, which are a result of local interests that include agricultural shows and community celebrations (Wright, 2007). It is important to understand the complete environment of the rural school (culture and climate), and its students, teachers, and administrators in order to appreciate the challenges they face in this time of student achievement and school accountability (Lamb, 2007).

### **Implications For Future Research**

The National Center for Education Statistics, a division of the U.S. Department of Education, stated that 17.4% of all public schools are located in rural areas, and 19% (8.8 million) students in the United States attended school in towns with populations smaller than 2,500 (Townsell, 2007). There are more children who attended rural schools in Texas than in any other state. However, this population is less than 18% of all Texas public school children (Provasnik et al., 2007) and 12.4% of Texas public schools are located in rural areas. The U.S. Department of Agriculture stated that 196 of Texas’ 254 counties are rural. Fifty-seven Texas counties are completely rural containing no town with a population of 2,500 or more (Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, 2008). Therefore, rural schools play an important role in community development so they can adapt to a highly mobile, industrialized society. It is important for all the stakeholders in a rural school, (i.e., policymakers, school administrators, and local citizens, to

understand the importance of schools to the respective rural communities (Wright, 2007).

Teachers, students, staff members, administrators, parents, and citizens are all individuals within a school. They constitute a community of learners. Common within the community of learners is a sense of belonging and shared responsibilities which is most indicative of rural schools (O'Neal & Cox, 2002). The rural school and its community are linked together for the survival of both. For the rural community, the school is the common denominator that brings small communities together economically and socially (Jimerson, 2006).

The support provided by the community makes the school's success possible and usually does so with little or no funds (Barley & Beesley, 2007). This generally provides the community with a feeling of ownership, thereby creating a perceived sense of unity encouraged by the school. The rural school potentially belongs to everyone because schools are the most comprehensive of all community institutions (Hobbs, 1992). Therefore, everyone in the community is viewed as a stakeholder of the school. For this study, the participants interviewed represented the stakeholders of Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School.

### *Subgroups*

For this study, the participants represented six groups of people with a vested interest in Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School. The participant groups were represented by students, parents, administrators, board members, teachers (both current and retired or no longer teaching), and school alumni. The ages ranged from 15 to 84 years old.

Much of the research concerning rural education has described conditions of rural schools through the perspectives of policymakers, teachers, parents, and administrators, though not in the same study. The field of rural education research has very little, if any, studies conducted where all of the stakeholders of a rural school participate and even fewer studies involving the perceptions of students. The reason is that few researchers focus on rural circumstances and offer little to strengthen the will of the stakeholders. The stakeholders in rural areas want to see their schools improve for the benefit of their rural communities (Howley, 1997).

Rural areas may endure more hardships because of the absence of quality research in comparison to other places. They may also suffer from federal policies meant for school improvement because, as noted by Howley (1997), educational research seems to demoralize improvement in rural education. Little attention is directed toward rural circumstances creating a negative impact on those working to improve their schools (Howley, 1997). The quality of rural education research has suffered due to it being misunderstood, with little or no funding, and a serious lack of encouragement (Sherwood, 2000). However, for a rural school to improve, it is necessary that a state encourage the citizens of rural communities to admit there are challenges, after which state policymakers must select a criteria for school improvement that corresponds with the ideas rural communities value as the characteristics of a quality school (Haller et al., 1999).

Rural schools serve students with various characteristics, including children of color, the socioeconomically disadvantaged, families without a proper education, and

single-parent or no-parent families (Hardre et al., 2007). Therefore, it is necessary that more qualitative and quantitative research be conducted and all demographic factors (i.e., ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status) of a rural community be considered (Stanley et al., 2008). In order to understand the culture and climate of a rural community and school along with the challenges they face, it is particularly important to conduct research with the students, teachers, administrators, and community members (Lamb, 2007).

### *Stereotype Threat*

As illustrated in the TAKS scores, the administration and faculty of Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School need to focus on closing the achievement gap between the students of color and White students. While the scores illustrate some improvement, the passing rate differences between African American and White learners is significant enough to cause a concern and to keep Pinewoods from becoming a Recognized or an Exemplary campus.

As noted by *Willis Johnson*, there may be a concern of being labeled a racist among the White teachers in relation to educating and disciplining the African American students. This could be interpreted as a form of stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is an effect caused by a negative feeling related to being labeled as belonging to a particular group that is characterized as being intellectually deficient (Perry et al., 2003; Splitter, 2007; Steele, 2003). Some individuals believe these threats contribute to this country's wide achievement gap, which tends to affect different ethnic, gender, and economic populations. Therefore, it would benefit the faculty to attend staff development, which

explains the significance of stereotype threat and its implications for effectively educating children of color.

Academic performance affected by racial, gender, or economic concerns have a greater impact in rural schools than urban schools obviously because such schools are small in size and population (McCracken & Miller, 1988). Consequently, it is important for teachers to be caring, supportive, and respectful in order to contribute to more positive and socio-emotional outcomes (Stanley et al., 2008) relating to student success. Further, the teachers of Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School will need to accept that there is an achievement gap that has a detrimental effect on their African American students. Therefore, they will have to be open to policy, curriculum, and instructional change if they truly believe in the academic success of all their students.

#### *University Teacher Prep-Programs and Teacher Recruitment*

Rural schools are a reality and should be studied objectively in rural education research and in university teacher preparation programs. The areas of rural economics, history, politics, and culture should be emphasized (Howley, 2001). Similar to *Mary Alice Lawson* who was from a large urban community, many teachers face isolation, cliques, and gossip after moving to rural schools. It is often difficult for individuals to adjust if they are not accustomed to rural communities and they generally do not live there very long. Rural education research has noted that rural administrators find it difficult to recruit and hire qualified teachers who can adjust to the school and the community and who will stay longer than one or two years (Townsell, 2007).

The plight of rural schools to find highly qualified teachers is difficult when the *ruralness* of the school is misunderstood. Therefore, rural schools would benefit with the help of college teacher preparation programs and a course on rural education for every student planning to teach. In addition, rural schools need effective orientation programs for new teachers to their schools. While this will not eliminate the feelings of isolation and discouragement, it will help new teachers not accustomed to rural schools to be better prepared to meet the challenges of teaching in a rural community. There are some adjustments to be made by individuals who move to a rural community. However, none are as important as learning to adjust and understand the culture of the community and school. Therefore, it is important for individuals to consider the ethnic origins of their students in order to help them become successful learners and to avoid the potential stigma and impact of a stereotype threat.

### **Limitations**

The focus of this study centered on the perceptions of the local stakeholders of a rural school district. The stakeholders included students, teachers, administrators, a board member, parents, and school alumni. It was important to get a general perspective from all the groups that represent the stakeholders of Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School. However, the research presented is limited to a representation of the stakeholders because not every student, teacher, administrator, board member, parent, or school alumni were interviewed. Therefore, it is inaccurate to assume the perceptions presented in this study represent all the stakeholders in the community. However, the participants'

perceptions presented are a result of interviews conducted across all groups of individuals who represent the stakeholders of Pinewoods Jr./Sr. High School.

Significant to the results of this study and considered a limitation for the purpose of research is my relationship with the participants interviewed. I knew several of the participants whom I interviewed. My sister is one of the teachers interviewed, as were two of her three children. In addition, one of the teachers interviewed was my history teacher when I was attending junior high school (32 years ago) in a community about 20 miles from Pinewoods. This teacher was a great influence on me as a student and was an instrumental part of the reason I taught history early in my career. Prior to the interviews, I was also acquainted with the superintendent and one other teacher. The purpose and significance of the research was clearly explained to each participant. Therefore, it is my belief that, during the course of the interviews, the questions asked to each participant were answered honestly and without reservations.

### **Conclusion**

Rural education research has stated that rural schools are facing difficult challenges today in regards to low funding, student achievement, and accountability. In addition, rural schools are often located in isolated areas making the recruitment of qualified teachers difficult. Enhancing the challenges further are the standards all schools have to meet as a result of the NCLB. While many rural schools are being rated as unacceptable and are forced to consolidate, there are still some rural schools that perceive themselves as successful while earning ratings of acceptable.

Rural schools must begin to teach from a broader spectrum in order to attain a higher and different standards of success. Since the NCLB became law, all public schools in this country are held accountable for students' scores on standardized tests (Roscigno et al., 2006). The time has come for rural secondary school leaders and educators to address their curriculum and instruction in order to better address for example, higher order thinking skills, problem solving, and entrepreneurship. The stakeholders' view of what is a successful school will benefit from change to include a more meaningful and comprehensive definition of student achievement and student success in the midst of NCLB demands. The stakeholders in this case study defined success beyond a standardized test. However, test scores presently drive public school accountability. As a result, rural schools will have to incorporate interventions to improve the academic outcomes of "all" of its learners. Yet, there are other tenets, as evidenced in their shared voices, which help define a successful school. Similar to the edicts of NCLB, their perceptions of success are also limited.

The potential to foster and develop more diverse voices in the construction and articulation of success in a rural school, presents a great opportunity for rural educational research to contextual the success of "all" students as a result of embracing and challenging NCLB and rural school stakeholder perceptions. For example, the outcomes of future students of Pinewoods High, who like Ms. Morris' youngest daughter, may be African American and experience a learning disability, demand that accountability mandates (state and federal) and all stakeholders embrace racial and learning differences from strength rather than deficit perspectives in a rural setting. Countering deficit



thinking in such situations would mean the development of curriculum interventions that provide meaningful options for lifelong success. Mrs. Morris daughter deserved more than she received. She is now 21 years of age, unemployed, and a beneficiary of an ineffective education exasperated by her racial difference to the school majority and her demonstration of a learning disability. These were her benefits as a result of her education in a successful rural high school.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**PARENT PERMISSION FORM**

**PARENT PERMISSION FORM  
A SUCCESSFUL RURAL SCHOOL MODEL  
AS PERCEIVED BY LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS IN THE  
PINEWOODS INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, TEXAS**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this form is to provide you (as the parent of a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to let your child participate in this research study. Also, if you decide to let your child be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your consent.

If you agree, your child will be asked to participate in a research study regarding a rural junior/senior high school in the Pinewoods Independent School District, Texas, and the perceptions of the faculty, administration, students and community of what constitutes a successful school. The purpose of this study is to determine what local stakeholders in the Pinewoods Independent School District perceive as a successful school model. He/she was selected to be a possible participant because he/she was identified by the school principal as a student who would provide unbiased and reliable information regarding the purpose of this study.

**What will my child be asked to do?**

If you allow your child to participate in this study, they will be asked to answer the interviewer's questions honestly and openly. This study will take approximately 30 minutes to an hour of his/her time for the interview process and will occur at least three times during a three-month period. The students participating in the study will be interviewed in a group and/or with one other student.

Your child will be audio recorded.

**What are the risks involved in this study?**

The risks associated in this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks your child ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**What are the possible benefits of this study?**

Your child will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, the findings of this study may provide valuable insight to the distinctive operations of the rural school. The intent of the researcher is that the findings of this study allow Pinewoods Independent School District to be used as a role model of school success throughout the state as a school that teaches its students with a dedicated faculty, staff, and administration, while working through various difficulties such as low socioeconomic students, a suffering community economy, and lack of efficient resources for the school.

**Does my child have to participate?**

No, your child doesn't have to be in this research study. You can agree to allow your child to be in the study now and change your mind later without any penalty.

This research study will take place during regular classroom activities; however, if you do not want your child to participate, an alternate activity will be available. You may elect for your child to be interviewed either before school or after school.

**What if my child does not want to participate?**

In addition to your permission, your child must agree to participate in the study. If your child does not want to participate, he/she will not be included in the study and there will be no penalty. If your child initially agrees to be in the study, he/she can change his/her mind later without any penalty.

**Who will know about my child's participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential, and when transcribing the audio tape to a written transcript, the names of the participants will be changed. Only the transcriber and the principle investigator will listen to the audio tape.

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Jeroladette Centilli will have access to the records.

If you choose to allow your child to participate in this study, he/she will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only Jeroladette Centilli will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for three years and then erased.

**Whom do I contact with questions about the research?**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Jeroladette Centilli, jcentilli@stx.rr.com, 956-251-0351.

**Whom do I contact about my child's rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979)458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

**Signature**

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions, and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to allow your child to participate in this study.

**Signature of Parent/Guardian:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Child:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Permission:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B**  
**INFORMATION SHEET**

**INFORMATION SHEET**  
*(For use with children ages 12 – 17)*  
**A SUCCESSFUL RURAL SCHOOL MODEL**  
**AS PERCEIVED BY LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS IN THE**  
**PINEWOODS INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, TEXAS**

**Introduction**

You have been asked to participate in a research study regarding a rural junior/senior high school in the Pinewoods Independent School District, Texas, and the perceptions of the faculty, administration, students, and community of what constitutes a successful school. The purpose of this study is to determine what local stakeholders in the Pinewoods Independent School District perceive as a successful school model. You were selected to be a possible participant because of your proven dedication and commitment to the Pinewoods Independent School District.

**What will I be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer the interviewer's questions honestly and openly. This study will take approximately one to two hours of your time for the interview process and will occur at least three times during a three-month period.

**Do I have to participate?**

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time and no one will be upset.

**Who will know about my participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential and when transcribing the audio tape to a written transcript, the names of the participants will be changed. Only the transcriber and the principle investigator will listen to the audio tape.

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Jeroladette Centilli will have access to the records.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only Jeroladette Centilli and the transcriber will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for three years and then erased.

**Participation**

If you would like to participate you may contact me directly at by email at [jcentilli@stx.rr.com](mailto:jcentilli@stx.rr.com) or contact your principal Mr. Connor. Thank you. You keep this information sheet.



**APPENDIX C**  
**CONSENT FORM**

**CONSENT FORM**  
**A SUCCESSFUL RURAL SCHOOL MODEL**  
**AS PERCEIVED BY LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS IN THE**  
**PINEWOODS INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, TEXAS**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this form is to provide you (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research and to record the consent of those who agree to be involved in this study.

You have been asked to participate in a research study regarding a rural junior/senior high school in the Pinewoods Independent School District, Texas, and the perceptions of the faculty, administration, students, and community of what constitutes a successful school. The purpose of this study is to determine what local stakeholders in the Pinewoods Independent School District perceive as a successful school model. You were selected to be a possible participant because of your proven dedication and commitment to the Pinewoods Independent School District.

**What will I be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer the interviewer's questions honestly and openly. This study will take approximately one to two hours of your time for the interview process and will occur at least three times during a three-month period

Your participation will be audio recorded.

**What are the risks involved in this study?**

The risks associated in this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**What are the possible benefits of this study?**

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, the findings of this study may provide valuable insight to the distinctive operations of the rural school. The intent of the researcher is that the findings of this study allow Pinewoods Independent School District to be used as a role model of school success throughout the state as a school that teaches its students with a dedicated faculty, staff, and administration, while working through various difficulties such as low socioeconomic students, a suffering community economy, and lack of efficient resources for the school.

**Do I have to participate?**

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University or the Pinewoods Independent School District being affected.

**Who will know about my participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential, and when transcribing the audio tape to a written transcript, the names of the participants will be changed. Only the transcriber and the principle investigator will listen to the audio tape.

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Jeroladette Centilli will have access to the records.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only Jeroladette Centilli and the transcriber will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for three years and then erased.

**Whom do I contact with questions about the research?**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Jeroladette Centilli, 956-729-1784, jcentilli@stx.rr.com.

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979)458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

**Signature**

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions, and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study.

**Signature of Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX D**  
**DATA CODING EXAMPLES**

### Data Coding Examples

<b>Lead question #1 - Positive Experiences</b>	Number of Responses
community supportive	8
small town	11
know everybody	9
teachers watched you grow up	4
teachers know your family	8
<b>Lead question #2 - Best Quality of the School</b>	
smallness of school	9
teachers	18
feel safe	5
good handle on discipline	12
school discipline	16
school pride	15
high expectations	13
<b>Lead question #3 - Worse Qualities</b>	
kids are ability grouped	1
no faculty collaboration	3
there is no worst quality	3
too much focus on athletics	4
no funds for activities outside the community	5
everybody knows everybody's business	8
athletics is stressed too much	4
no set curriculum	4
<b>Lead question #4 - Best academic or athletic activity on campus</b>	
not just one	7
FFA	7
Football	9
UIL	9
<b>Lead question #5 - Worse activity</b>	
None	10
<b>Lead question #6 - Community</b>	
laidback community	2
support by the community-	15
they are with you no matter what	6
they take care of their own	7
high expectations	7
good morals	2
<b>Lead question #7 - Tell me more about your community.</b>	
Small	14

friendly	9
<b>Lead question #8 - Prejudice and racial tension about the community</b>	
some racist	4
at a smaller level	2
you don't see it out in public	3
integration was not forced, it was voluntary done	2
no	8
<b>Lead question #9 - Would you consider Pinewoods a wealthy community?</b>	
no	8
middle class and poor people	4
<b>Lead question #10 - What is the best thing you received at Pinewoods HS?</b>	
good education	7
very good teachers	8
real supportive of you	6
<b>Lead question #11 - What is the worst thing you received at Groveton HS?</b>	
paddling - but it was deserved	2
corporal punishment not seen as a negative	4
old building - wooden floors, old heaters	1
got in trouble - suspended	1
<b>Lead question #12 - How does Pinewoods prepare for TAKS?</b>	
concentrate on TAKS	9
TAKS remediation	10
testing simulations	5
don't focus on TAKS	9
<b>Lead question #13 - Most important aspect of getting a diploma from Pinewoods</b>	
prepare you for college or special school (trade)	4
you might use this in the real world	2
<b>Lead question #14 - Do you feel that Pinewoods prepared you for college?</b>	
Yes	8
level of rigor in instruction will prepare you for College	5
the community and school connection is very strong	5
very supportive	9
<b>Lead question #15 - Do teachers spend a lot of time in school?</b>	
yes	6

they don't get paid extra	10
teacher dedication is above and beyond	12
<b>Lead question #16 - What aspect of education has Pinewoods pride itself in ?</b>	
athletics	9
football team	6
everything	7
sports and academics are valued equally	7
brag about students	6
newspaper writes about successes	5
high expectations	7
<b>Lead question #17 - Community use school</b>	
Yes	2
Lions Club	2
4H	2
<b>Lead question # 18 - School center of community</b>	
Yes	5
80% work at school	2
<b>Lead question #19 - Changes needed at Pinewoods</b>	
more money	6
nothing	4
stronger support for academic contests	4
building needs to be updated	7
need more technology	4
<b>Lead question #20 - School successful</b>	
No	1
Yes	22
prepares student for college	10
prepares students for real world	7
graduates are well rounded	6
academically successful	10
tradition	4
pride	5
discipline	8
good characteristics like honesty dedication and responsibility	5
<b>Lead question #21 - Has there been a female administrator?</b>	
one female in elementary for about 6 months	3
doubt it	1
no	8
no one has ever gone for it	4
would like to see a diversified administration	2

<b>Lead question #22 - Is there diversity?</b>	
yes	3
no	11
<b>Lead question #23 - Industry in Pinewoods</b>	
cattle business	4
logging	5
forestry	7
agricultural community	7
<b>Lead question #24 - What keeps teachers in Pinewoods?</b>	
being part of a successful program	3
pride	11
dedication	9
small campus	3
good discipline	9
community and parent support	7
comfortable	4
competitive	7
<b>Lead question # 25 - Minority or female on board</b>	
No	10
<b>Lead question #26 - Has there been a crisis?</b>	
gas leak	3
when electricity goes off for more than an hour	1
none	3



## VITA

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### EDUCATION

2008	Ph.D., Educational Administration Texas A&M University College Station, Texas
1999	M.S., Educational Administration Texas A&M International University Laredo, Texas
1987	B.S., Education Southwest Texas State University San Marcos, Texas

### CERTIFICATIONS

Texas Teaching Certificate 6-12

Mid-Management Certificate All Levels

### EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

2000-Present	Assistant Principal, United High School United Independent School District, Laredo, Texas
1988-2000	Teacher, United High School United Independent School District, Laredo, Texas

This dissertation was typed and edited by Marilyn M. Oliva at Action Ink, Inc.